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THE SENSE OF HUMOR

THE SENSE OF HUMOR

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MAX EASTMAN

AUTHOR OF "ENJOYMENT OF POETRY," "COLORS OF LIFE—POEMS AND SONGS AND SONNETS," ETC.

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TO FLORENCE DESHON

PREFACE

ALTHOUGH I have tried to make this book enjoyable, and keep it alive to the qualities of its subject, my prevailing purpose has been scientific. So far as the present technique of psychology permits of solutions, I have tried to solve the problem of humorous laughter. And if I have taken one valid step toward that solution, it will please my purpose better than any amount of the success that might be called literary.

The relation between science and the literature of generalities seems to me to be one of the great problems of the future. For science is developing so technical and special a body of knowledge upon every subject under the sun, that only an expert can know anything substantial of what is to be known about it. And yet literary men with no real training in science continue to pretend that they know something, if not everything, about all subjects. They write essays upon general problems with the same free joy of self-expression with which they write stories or poems about particular things or experiences. And these essays, while they may stimulate the reader and give him a fine sense of mental companionship, are very likely to be in flat contradiction to some method or result that scientific men have already humbly and conscientiously verified—in which case they certainly belong to the second and not the first order of human values. The attitude of Carlyle toward Darwin's dis-

coveries is an example in point, and Nietzsche's amateur views on heredity at the very basis of his gospel of the Superman, and the light manner in which men like H. G. Wells and Bernard Shaw, and at one time Maxim Gorki, while professing to be scientific socialists, have dismissed or miscomprehended the Marxian theories of history.

This may seem a remote opening for a book about humor, but it happens that the problem of humor has always been a special field of play for the irresponsible essay-writer, and the literature that adorns it is notoriously inconsequential. When I told Bernard Shaw that I was writing this book, he advised me to go to a sanitarium. "There is no more dangerous literary symptom," he said, "than a temptation to write about wit and humor. It indicates the total loss of both." And with a proper emphasis upon the word *literary*, that is entirely true. But if technical science continues to develop as it has in the last half-century, and men of letters continue not to develop, it will soon be true that there is no more dangerous literary symptom than a temptation to write about any problem of general knowledge. People will take our Plays seriously, but not our Prefaces—not our essays, epigrams, and immortal disquisitions. These they will glance through with an indulgent smile, and then go look the thing up in a laboratory report and find out what the truth is.

The problem of scientific as opposed to "literary" knowledge will have to be solved. And in as much as

scientific knowledge happens upon the whole to be correct, I can see no way to solve it, except for the literary people to go to work. Of this gentle revolution I have tried to give a small example in the present book.

In the First Part I have stated my own theory as to what humor is, and I have shown its application to the various kinds of things we laugh at. In the Second Part I have given an account of the historic attempts of mankind to explain humor and state the causes of laughter. I have classified these attempts and criticised them from the standpoint of my own theory, but I have tried to make my account generous enough so that the reader who wishes to experiment or think further can find here all the leading ideas that others might contribute to his effort. In the concluding chapter I have treated my own theory in somewhat the same way as the rest, showing its relation to them and to the existing psychology of the emotions.

The Second Part is written mainly for purposes of historic reference and technical argument, and will not perhaps interest the general reader. It is folly, at any rate—in this day of the newspaper, the magazine, pamphlet, sign-board, prospectus, and the general onward rush for nowhere—for an author to pretend that people are really going to sit down and read his book. I therefore extend my benediction and gratitude, and the permission to say that he has read my book, to any one who will finish Part I and read the last chapter of Part II. He will know all the affirmative things I have to say about humorous laughter.

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PART I

THE SENSE OF HUMOR

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CHAPTER I

LAUGHTER OF PLEASURE

With almost every new system of philosophy there comes a magical explanation of laughter as a kind of side-show. A portion of the apparatus is removed from the main tent, a slight relaxation of intelligence is permitted, and a number of tamed witticisms are ushered in, and go through their paces in a mechanical way, or simply slink around and refuse to be humorous upon exhibition. The result is a mood of strained mercy and embarrassment very little akin to the sympathy of true understanding. I think the error in this procedure is to regard the explanation of laughter as a side-show, and not a main part of the explanation of man. Perhaps there is no room for fun and friendly merriment in that small cerebral habitation which philosophers call the universe, and so naturally to them the problem of laughter appears trivial and external, a "pert challenge" to their great powers of speculation. But to the more humble observer who simply looks out of his window at the daily stream of behavior, inquiring of its course, it seems as though men and women were always seeking for something or anything at which they might smile. And those explanations which make laughter a mere by-product of

other enterprises—a mechanical accident, a condition of release or overflow—seem to give small justice to this continual and very dexterous accomplishment that distinguishes man and raises him a little above the less amiable animals.

Laughter is, after speech, the chief thing that holds society together. It seems to be an intrinsic part of the gregarious instinct in men, signifying that they are something more than merely restive in solitude, and desirous to stand alongside of their kind and chew, signifying that to be with others is for them action and vivid employment of their nature. A smile is the universal welcome, and laughter is a greeting that we may give to any arriving friend. It is a definite affirmation of hospitality and delight. To laugh is to say "Yes." It is to say "Good!" "I agree to your emotion!" "I am happy to see you!" A smile is the path along which two selves approach, and not to smile is to declare off the meeting explicitly.

Perhaps some mechanical accident might explain why this instinct flows out in just these good wrinkles and gusts of amiability, and not in some other mode of action. We can imagine that we might have accomplished the same thing more quietly with our ears, as we see that dogs accomplish it with their tails. But if we consider the handicap they suffer in conversation, and observe how they fold themselves half-double in a vain effort to bring forward that rear-end cordiality into the main scene of action, we shall be inclined to acknowledge a social utility even in the forms of human

laughter. The need for an expression which should be luminous, and should mingle readily with speech and vision, may well have been the determining factor in its evolution. A smile is a moving summary of the chief points of personality. It is so complete and so delicate an employment of the features that medical doctors rely upon it to reveal the least trace of a facial paralysis when all the other expressions appear normal. And laughter is but an addition of breath and voice and gesture to this already complicated act. The two can not be distinguished either physically or in the fundamental qualities of feeling involved. Those who have attempted this have neglected to observe that every one who laughs is still smiling. The celebration is single and continuous as it is complex and delicate. It is a celebration of social pleasure, a blessing without which our lives would be but the spare outline of what they are.

In Charles Fourier this pleasure was so dominant that he believed a law of "social attraction" could play the same rôle in political science as the law of gravitation in physics. And as a natural symptom of that excessive state of feeling, we learn that Charles Fourier never smiled. It is usually through such an inhibition of our actions that our passions are intensified. And that, I suppose, is why we feel so warm a trust in the friendliness of those who smile gently, and mostly through their eyes, while those who "laugh with the lips" we think are of more use in luck than trouble. All the famous moralists of Greece and Rome, and the

Hindu sages too, were of the opinion that unrestrained laughter is not characteristic of the wise and strong. But for my part I think the surest sign of a healthy spirit is to see friendly joyfulness pour all over his features, and down into his throat and the muscles of his body without bound or hindrance. The smile that fills my imagination is one that begins with a flash, because the motion of the upper lip comes first and so strongly, and yet that lip broadens a little as it rises so that while all the teeth shine the mouth is only redder than it was—the cheeks curve, and the eyes gather light and attract the brows and lashes toward them just infinitesimally, warming their vivid glitter with those radiant soft lines of good nature and good-will. Such living motions are more beautiful than any wine or flower or colors in the clouds of heaven, and they are almost the source of the light in which men struggle through so much pain and blind anxious endeavor to the goal of darkness.

A reason why this so obvious thing has escaped the philosophers is that they have not clearly distinguished laughter from the curling of the lip in scorn. And yet the temper of these two acts is opposite and their neural machinery distinct, as may be seen in the fact that we laugh with both sides of our face, but most of us can sneer only with one. To unflesh an eye-tooth and emit short breaths or ha-ha's against a man's presence, is as far from laughter as the fangs of a canine animal are from his tail. It is therefore upon good biological and bodily grounds, as well as upon

grounds of feeling, that we dismiss from the topic of laughter at the outset the topic of scorn. Not only the sneer itself, but all of its disagreeable children, dwelling in the words *gibe, leer, jeer, scoff, flout, hoot, gird, niggle, taunt,* the *sardonic* or *cynic* probe, and the lash of *sarcasm,* are to be got out of our way at the beginning. The word *sarcasm* means in its origin *a tearing of the flesh like dogs,* and may well be considered a function of the teeth rather than of the lips. The *cynic* attitude of wit derives its name ultimately also from the dog. And even the word *sardonic* is plausibly derived from the Greek, *σαίρω*, used originally of animals, and corresponding to our phrase "show your teeth." *Deride* also, although in origin a word of laughter, has gone over to the wolf's breed, and does not describe any of the true family of the smile. It is possible, of course, that the feelings indicated in these words may mingle with laughter, as may a great variety of the moods of men, and give rise to new flavors of emotion, but they are none of them involved in the essence and generation of laughter itself, which is not an act of rejection but of acceptance. It is not pain, but pleasure. It is not derision, but delight, as any one may convince himself by observing it in the cradle at about the fortieth day. For that is the day of its birth—and on that day a companion is born. And the smile of dawning welcome, there so eventful, and so clearly demonstrated to be essential to the very warmth and existence of social communion, is the native original of all smiles and all laughter.

The variety of uses to which this expression is subsequently put, may be understood, if we realize how profoundly the social instinct and emotion enter into and pervade our whole conscious existence. We may almost say they are the receptacle in which human nature is compounded. It is only in relation to others that our own miraculous selves ever could have been created. And therefore it is not surprising if these selves continue a social bearing even in complete solitude, and grin into their beer, or chuckle upon the arrival of an idea in their minds, or make merry with the winds and wild roses blowing over the hill. Indeed anything that drops pleasantly and well ripened into the lap, having been expected long enough, or being sufficiently unexpected to possess an eventful character, will usually be greeted laughingly by people not sitting under the incubus of some dull ideal of decorum. And in times of true positive happiness almost any stimulus whatever that is not painful will awaken a smile. People who are happy laugh oftener, indeed, and upon a less special provocation, than do people who are sorrowful cry. And therefore it is possible to say that laughter, from being a means for the communication of *social pleasure*, has, by a natural economy in evolution, become a means for the *social communication* of pleasure, and has acquired almost a kind of identity in our nervous systems with the state of joy or satisfaction in general. It is a manifestation of success and plenitude of life, and has been so understood, not only in the songs of poets—"The fields did

laugh, the flowers did freshly spring"—but also in the rituals of religion. For it is only in our own too Christian times that laughter was banished out of the church, and tears alone established as an appropriate approach to the deity. At the sacrificial altar, during the Roman festival of the Lupercalia, two young men would be touched with a bloody knife, and when the blood had been wiped from their foreheads with a handful of wool dipped in milk, the ritual required that they should laugh. It was a symbol of their deliverance into life, like that of Isaak under the knife of Abraham. And we are told that the name *Isaak* itself in its origin means "he who laughs." For thus in all primitive and naïve religions, which are not so tinctured as ours is with death and negation, and whose believers actually believe in the reality of their deities, laughter has played its part. Not only have men laughed before God in thanksgiving for the blessing of life, but the gods themselves—the eight hundred myriads of gods—in whom life is immortal, have laughed immortally together.

For these reasons it seems strange that tears and moanings and the piteous short wrinkles of grief in the forehead should be accepted by philosophers as justified through their expressive value, while laughter, as though it were some kind of slip or misdemeanor on the part of nature, should always have to be explained away. I will not try to explain laughter away, but assuming it to be one of the most necessary gifts we have, and wholly to be taken for granted even if there

were no funny thing in the world, I will explain why it was carried beyond its original domain, and employed in the appreciation of humor and jokes.

CHAPTER II

LAUGHTER OF PLAYFUL PAIN

THE condition in which joyful laughter most continually occurs is that of play. And this is because the satisfactions enjoyed in play are strong and frequent, without being passionate enough to produce a more specific expression. Play is an attitude in which we exercise our instincts and experience our emotions superficially, as though tasting or smelling of them, but not drinking them down. We arrive at the point of satisfaction sooner and with less organic disturbance. We do not have to hack and slay an enemy in order to appease our fighting thirst; we are contented to win on points. We do not have to produce and cherish the flesh of a baby; we satisfy our parental instinct upon a puppy or a bundle of rags. And so it is with all our instincts—we fight, we hunt, we conduct courtships, we construct houses and cities, acquire property, incur dangers, we lord it over our fellows, we demean ourselves before them, all in a miniature or mimic way, and yet with a pleasure that is altogether real. It is as though nature, realizing how strenuous and difficult a thing it is to live, had provided for us this faery-shadow life, in which we might prepare and exercise ourselves without suffering too much or perishing in strong passion, for the more genuine achievement of

satisfactions—and in which again we might refresh and restore ourselves, when the strain of achievement is great, and genuine satisfactions are too long withheld. Play is the school of nature, and also it is her device of recreation. And we can easily believe that without such a device she could never have created anything so complex, agile, intelligent, and resolute as some of the animals are, which play much and have a long period of youth.

Philosophers have been accustomed to define play as any activity that is undertaken for the pleasure involved in it, and not for the sake of an end to be achieved. And we do, of course, naturally call such deliberate pursuits of pleasure in action playful. But, although it is natural to call them playful, it is not good science to define play as consisting of this pursuit. For play in its elementary form is not deliberate but instinctive. It is not a conscious undertaking but a spontaneous attitude. It is not distinguished by the idea of getting pleasure, but by the fact that pleasure is so easily got. When we put our hand between the teeth of a young puppy of the fighting breed in a rough mimic of battle, we do not rely upon his understanding that the object of the engagement is amusement and not bloodshed; we rely upon his instincts. We know that he will perceive and adopt the play-attitude without previous instruction, and with hardly the possibility of error. He can play at fighting just as early and just as mysteriously well as he can fight. He does not have to keep up any mental reservation, or

have it explained to him that it is "all in fun," that we are "only fooling." It is not an idea, but a fact, that he is fooling; and he can be relied upon never to sink his teeth home, for the reason that in that state of fact he gets a full satisfaction without it. In our own mature and intellectual life a conscious purpose seizes and develops this hereditary gift, a serious thought devises games and sports and dances to increase the harvest of its pleasure. But at the root and centre of the whole perennial circus of our fun, there remains the same fact—the same definite condition of the instincts. And however it may be ultimately explained, this condition is characterized by the accessibility and predominance of pleasure, rather than by the pursuit of it.

We do not know much in a scientific way about pleasure and displeasure, or what it is within us that makes us satisfied or unsatisfied. But we know at least that a deep and general activity of our instincts entails them both. The instinct of fear and that called "disgust" seem to be painful in their very beginning, and all the instincts hurt us when they are aroused and then baffled so that we feel the lack of their fulfilment. For this reason the predominance of pleasure in their playful exercise is more remarkable, and implies a more complex adjustment of our organs, than we who are so accustomed to the fact have ever thought. For if real and solid satisfaction comes in the play-attitude from mimic or superficial achievement, we should expect dissatisfaction to be

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real and solid whenever this slight achievement fails. If we shout so joyfully in play's victories why should we not sob desperately in its pains? It seems to me just here that nature, in her necessity to make us happy when we play—by what interior means we can hardly guess—has triumphed over the very terms of life. For she has ordained it in the inmost structure of our minds that playful failures have a peculiar interest for us, and playful dreadfulness instead of hurting makes us laugh. Indeed it is the first sure sign of play in babies when they giggle instead of looking troubled at our gargoyle faces, and when they find amusement in our snatching away a thing they have reached out to grasp. That feeling of amusement is a new, unique one, and that giggle is a different act from the smile of gratification which greets a friendly look. It is an act of welcoming a playful shock or disappointment—an act for which our nervous systems are arranged at birth as perfectly, and with as specific an accompaniment of interest and emotion, as they are arranged to greet with anger and pugnacious effort a more serious blockage of our wills. It is an instinct. And this instinct is the germ and simple rudiment of what we call the sense of humor.

We can make credible to our minds the development of such an instinct, if we consider what a delicate balance is kept up in many circumstances between pleasure and pain. Even when we are seriously shocked and horrified, a spasm of mad laughter not infrequently occurs; and in great moments of

delight, on the other hand, and often at the very tip-top of laughter, we fall to weeping. It is almost a custom for one or two to dissolve in tears around the Christmas-tree and on birthdays; and the sobs of happy love and of sudden rescue, the strong weeping at the prodigal's return, are among the most natural manifestations of healthy human nature. In unhealthy states the interchange of these expressions is even more pronounced. A chronic habit of violent laughing at sad news has been observed; and the acute confusion of hot tears with hilarious laughter is almost the commonest form of hysteric seizure. In young children such confusions are not called hysterical, but are assumed to be normal to the undeveloped. They make it evident that in our fine mechanism of nerves some rather slight interior accident can divert a potential state of feeling from one of these channels of act and reality into the other. And although the ability to sob and thus droop down with joy, could hardly have been cherished as an advantage in the development of our species, we need not be surprised if the opposite accident—the ability to smile and even outrageously to laugh when we are shocked or disappointed—has been crystallized and, for the purposes of play at least, made fast in our endowment as a mode of regular response.

The most crude and elementary form of play, the only one which has a physiological basis of its own, is tickling. And since much of the laughter that occurs in tickling is accompanied with a humorous emotion,

we must look to this game for the authentic and first picture of what humor is. It appears that our skin has an exaggerated sensitivity at certain points which in real battle it is of vital importance that we should defend. We dread to be touched at these points, and impetuously protect ourselves against the playful assaults of a companion. We thus learn and exercise the art of self-defense. But although we have so violent an impulse to protect these points from contact, we are not violently aggrieved when they are touched, but on the contrary we are uproariously amused. We find this thing which we had fought off with horror to be not horrible at all but comic. And for that reason, although we continue to fight it off, we still continue to invite it. We experience thus a confused sense of pain combined with pleasure, or at least the dread of pain with humorous delight, which since the day of Plato the psychologists have vainly taxed their science to explain.

Whether the pleasure is on the surface and the pain, as Plato seemed to think it, "underneath," or whether the sensation is painful and the pleasure lies in some conceptual or perceptive contribution of the brain, or whether there are two kinds of sensation deserving each a long new serious Greek name, as a modern scientist proposes, the question never has been put to rest. Only that something which is or ought to be painful, is also or sometimes manages to be pleasant, they are all agreed. And we can, by means of the concept of a humorous instinct, give at

least a simple and not illogical description of the point of their agreement.

Tickling is unpleasant when we "take it seriously." And for that reason to some sober adults it is always unpleasant, and even merry children cannot enjoy tickling or respond with laughter unless they are distinctly in a mood of play. For that reason also, even where the skin is sensitive enough, we cannot very well enjoy tickling ourselves. We cannot regard our own attacks as playful. And they are not playful—for the essence of this fighting game, if not perhaps in some degree the essence of all play, is social. But when we are attacked by a playmate, toward whom we are "in fun," we find at just those points where we should experience a disagreeable sensation if we were serious, the experience of a peculiar and pleasant emotion. It is a true description of this fact to say that those otherwise unpleasant contacts, and those otherwise intolerable dismays and disappointments, awaken through our central nervous systems in the state of play, an instinctive laughter whose interior feeling we enjoy. And it is an explanation at least of the biological development of such laughter, to say that without it this most useful form of play could never have acquired its peculiar character—the character of mortal combat without suffering.

In common English speech we recognize this critical position of the humorous instinct in the mind's mechanics, for we are agreed now upon the word *funny* as a generic name for all the situations which arouse it.

And *funny* stands in a mid-position between play and perplexity. It appears that some northern cousin of the Gaelic word for pleasure, *fonn*, was so full of pure and fair delight that in the seventeenth century it was simply ravished and carried away home by these literary English—who have always been word-robbers of the most delicate and voluptuous taste—and there it absorbed into its meaning, as *fun*, all that there is of affirmative enjoyment in the mood of play. But this enjoyment is so evidently related by proximity and dependence to a sense of humor, that within another century the word *funny* was found to be a name for the situations in which that instinct is appealed to. And these situations, again, are so clearly of a baffling or a lightly troubling nature, that this same word *funny* is now in another century employed to describe things in sober life that perplex us, and give pause, not too distressing, to our serious wills.

The development of language has thus been wiser in our time than any philosopher. But once long ago the great unharnessed eye of Rabelais perceived and named this same connection of qualities. It was in his celebration of *Pantagruelism*, "which you know," he said, "is a certain jollity of mind, pickled in the scorn of fortune." That was a description of humor in its first as well as its last essence. And Rabelais is the sovereign of the world's humor, exactly because all his jests and vagaries are conceived, born, and bred to flourish in their native home and atmosphere, the attitude of play. With that gigantic mental and

poetic equipment which we attribute besides only to Plato and Shakespeare, this genius of exuberance simply romped and gambolled all over the universe. It is well that he should speak the last word here.

CHAPTER III

ELEMENTARY HUMOR

PLAY, then, is a preliminary or divertive surface-life in which success is fun, but failure funny. And it is natural enough, and will seem entirely proper to those who have ever tasted the dregs of hard work and deep passion, that we revert to this elysian condition very frequently in the midst of our serious lives. There may be a tincture of it in the most solemn efforts.

> The happy are they
> Whose work is play.

And it seems certain that in any just and genially composed society a good many people will be able to be happy a good deal of the time, and there will be at least a hearty effort toward the propagation of those "jolly fools of ease and leisure," who, like Rabelais himself, could be happy all the time if they did not have to settle the account.

Even in our own fallen state of moral bondage and pecuniary anxiety there is a development of the negative or defensive side of playful happiness, the sense of humor, which alters the entire color of our lives. It goes with us into the most severe and head-weary-

ing and humdrum pursuits, protecting us with its shield of fine amusement against what would otherwise be a continual series of trivial but irritating stings of disappointment. It enables us to be experimental and persistent in our efforts and perceptions. It makes our impulses elastic. It is a very inward indispensable little shock-absorber—an instinct, as we might call it, for making the best of a bad thing.

For in every case in which a man laughs humorously there is an element which, if his sensitivity were sufficiently exaggerated, would contain the possibility of tears. He is a man who has suffered or failed of something. And although in the humor of art he usually arrives at something else, and that often better than he had expected, in the humor of every-day life he frequently arrives nowhere at all. And the true agility of his comic sense is proven, not in the cleverness with which he detects the point of pleasure in a jocular confection, but in the alert twinkle of welcome with which he greets any genuine and definite void appearing where a pleasure was expected. When a man intends to drive a tack into the carpet, and drives his thumb in instead, he may be said to have failed of a pleasure, and if he is not too remote from the mood of play, and did not intend to drive the tack in too far, it should be possible for him to smile. It was upon such occasions at least that nature intended him to smile. For her purpose in making humor accessible to him in sober life was to preserve his digestion, and defend the ears and lives of his immediate family, no

matter into what extremities of small pest and disaster her restlessness might drive him.

Humor is thus the most philosophic of all the emotions. It is a recognition in our instinctive nature of what our minds in their purest contemplation can inform us, that pleasure and pain are, except for the incidental purpose of preserving us, indifferent—that failure is just as interesting as success. Good and bad are but colored lights rayed out upon the things around us by our will to live, and since life contains both good and bad forever, that very will that discriminates them practically, gives a deeper poetic indorsement to them both. Let us not take the discrimination, then, too seriously. So speaks the sense of humor with a gay wisdom among our emotions.

And when gaiety fails, and those in whose temperament this sense predominates give their serious estimate of the values they have played with, it is apt to be the same. Their estimate is sceptical. There is a sorrow in the seriousness of humorous people. They do not easily find among ideals or purposes a place of rest. The courage in their eyes is wistful. They are superior to this world, not as the saint who fastens upon some more-than-earnest faith to raise him out of it, but as a child is superior to his toys. He looks about upon them for a moment, knowing them for what they are. He is not disillusioned; he is simply aware of the fact that all their values derive from his own whims.

There was indeed a note of disillusion in those sad

documents that Mark Twain left after him. His sublime and yet rather feebly philosophic declaration of the worthlessness of all the myriads of human lives —"a mistake, a failure, and a foolishness," as he called them—was a too negative reaction against the ethico-deific atmosphere of puritan and presbyterian America.

"Another myriad takes their place," he says, "and copies all they did, and goes along the same profitless road, and vanishes as they vanished—to make room for another, and another, and a million other myriads, to follow the same arid path through the same desert, and to accomplish what the first myriad and all the myriads that came after it accomplished—nothing!"

The great child was sick of the mythical pretenses of his elders; but it was only from the standpoint of those pretenses that his own perceptions could acquire so purple and pessimistic an eloquence. Stated affirmatively the clear-eyed sceptic's view of human life—life's transitory arrogant self-constitution of the ends for which it shall be lived—however sadly it may answer some pale longings of the heart, is not so loftily disheartening. It is heroic rather than sublime. Montaigne is the humorist's philosopher. His brave, cool, undeluded assumption that life is no more than what it is or makes itself in any instance, and that the values we impute to things have no external or transcendent sanction, is but a development of the natural implications of the humorous sense. I do not see how any one habitually in the play-attitude, and whose very genius lies in the subjective transmutation

of these values, could well hold to an opposite opinion. And I doubt if the world ever saw a great inevitable humorist who had not, in his inmost metaphysics, something of this same noble and intrepid sceptic.

Humor is of all things most unlike religion. It fills a similar function in our moral economy, relieving us of the intolerable poignancy of our individual wills. But it does this by a simple emotional mitigation, whereas religion seems to require a great and heavy process in the heart. Religion magnifies the seriousness of our passions, but finds an object which is impersonal, or merely ideal, or in some other way superior to the vicissitudes of fortune, to which it may attach them—binding them all, or many of them, together into one fixed habit of indefeasible satisfaction. From this great habit the mystic derives his fortitude. He declares that all the failures and imperfections in the bitter current of time's reality are a part of God's eternal perfection, and so he makes himself happy to suffer them. The humorist declares that they are funny, and he accomplishes the same thing. They both depart in some sense from the poet's pure experience of life, but they depart in contrary directions. And so it is not surprising that the mystics should seem wanting in the sacred gift of humor, and that humorists should be not often of a prayerful turn.

A prayer is indeed the intense opposite of a comic laugh, and the assertion of Lamennais, of Johann Erdmann, and other pious philosophers, that they could not imagine the Christ laughing, is a true index

of the condition toward Him of their own nerves. Humor is not, as they thought, necessarily malign or irreverent, but it is of a quality incompatible with that fixed concentration of serious feelings which we call devout. Its essence is flexibility instead of fixation. Its food is not unity, but variety. It is superior to religion in its hospitality toward the continual arrivals of truth. It is a more congenial companion of science. Not only is humor independent of any particular belief or intellectual commitment, and so not hostile to the mood of inquiry, but in softening the rigor of the passions it removes the chief obstacle to the process of verification. Is not pure science in fact a kind of arduous play among the meanings that have been devised by the applied sciences for the purposes of work? I remember that Isaac Newton described his discoveries as those of a child at play among ideas. And at any rate it is the continual effort of pure science to get rid of human valuations where it can. Humor is the very act of taking those valuations lightly. It is an act of aggressive resignation.

Mahomet boasted that with faith and prayer he could make a mountain get up and come to him. And when a great crowd of his followers had assembled, and all his incantations failed, he said: "Well, if the mountain will not come to Mahomet, Mahomet will go to the mountain." And so we strive with all our energy and ingenuity to make the course of things do us pleasure, and as the course of things continually disappoints us, we say: "Very well—I will find a special

pleasure in the disappointment!" That is our sense of humor. Humor is Mahomet going to the mountain. Its very existence is a kind of joke at the expense of destiny.

CHAPTER IV

JOKES WITH A POINT

This little interior line of self-defense may seem a slender ground upon which to explain all the aggressive revels of wit and humorous fancy among the joys of existence. It seems both too negative and too simple a thing. But we must remember that in every prolonged laughing tale or entertainment there are many objects of delight as well as of humor. In the comic theatres our merry laughter is often pure of any admixture from this instinct. And the word *comedy* itself, although so closely related to the word *comic*, does not mean a humorous drama. It means, if I may add one more opinion to this ancient subject of dispute, a drama in which the play-attitude prevails —a "play," in short, as properly so called, and so distinguished from that intenser drama in which although we know it is illusive our passions are seriously engaged. And in these "plays," even when they are very boisterous, and make us laugh in chorus like a flock of hungry geese, it is pleasure half the time, excited pleasure and not humor, that we feed upon.

There is a further reason, too, why this defensive instinct seems too simple to explain the forms of humor. And that is that in our adult and calculating years the things that we call humorous are not often

purely so. We do not laugh loudly, except at times of rare hilarity, at the mere negation of our own tendencies. We are not playful enough for that. We think it is a little "foolish" to take so much pleasure as children do in all kinds of jerks, pranks, monkey-faces, and absurd nonsense. Playing children enjoy so indiscriminately every kind of shock or balk or failure of anything to be quite what it should, that we with our egregious wisdom have almost decided that they lack the sense of humor altogether. Their sense of humor is more primed and violent than ours, more close to its true purpose; and that is why they laugh so lavishly, and without the slight restraint which might intensify their inward feeling of the laughter. They laugh at anything that is really nothing; but we require a hint of the delivery of real values to warm up our interest in nothing, and make it seem intelligent to laugh. We laugh at jokes. And a joke is a little node, or gem-like moment in our experience, created by the exact coincidence of a playful shock or disappointment with a playful or a genuine satisfaction.

Our brain is just balancing, as we might imagine, upon that fine edge between pain and pleasure at the failure of what it had momently desired, when there looms into the void some unexpected ripe apple of a thing desired more, or desired at least deeply and continually, and with a hunger that can be relied on to be glad. And by this means that arbitrary trick of turning loss into gain, which was our humorous instinct, is actually warranted and borne out by the facts.

The loss is gain; reality imitates our instinct; the laughter of pleasure flows in to reinforce the laughter of playful pain, and we experience not only a humorous feeling, but a feeling of aptness that is not like anything else under the sun. We call this fine moment of coidentity the "point" of a joke. And it is by cherishing the quality of these points—perfecting the playful negations and sliding into the hearts of them all kinds, degrees, and shades, and tones of life's real value, that the comic artist gets the whole world tinctured with a humorous emotion, and builds such varicolored structures as he does.

He tells us of a terrible fighting man of his neighborhood who has been offended by a gang of bums, and proposes to go over to their saloon and clean them out.

"You come along," he says to his friend, "and you can stand outside the door and count them as they come through."

The friend goes along—and our perennial anticipation of a riot goes too. We take up our position in the entrance with his friend. There is a moment of silence, then a great *bump* through the door, and the voice of the terrible fighting man: "Stop counting—it's me!"

Without analyzing all the delights that we receive here in lieu of the grand scene of which we have been deprived, we can say that these delights are more exquisite, and, lusty as our taste is for massacres, just as satisfying to the prevailing appetites of our nature.

We have lost a conquering hero, but gained the abasement of a braggart, and that is the way in which our grown-up wishes like to be fooled.

Humor in its adult state is thus seen to be somewhat like electricity, and to possess two currents—a negative and a positive. The negative current is a discommoding of some light or playful interest that has been specifically aroused, the positive a gratification of some interest which, if it has not been specifically aroused, may at least be assumed to have a general existence in the hearts of those who are to laugh. And from this it appears how very precarious an explosive a joke is, and in how many different ways it can manage to miss fire. For one may fail to arouse any interest in the first place, or he may arouse a too serious interest, in the matter which is to supply the negative current—or perhaps an interest badly proportioned to that which is to supply the positive current; and then he may have miscalculated on the positive side, and thought that his audience would like something to which they can hardly offer a moment's attention or which they may heartily oppose, and so he will find he has given them only a double disappointment for their pains.

A joke is not a thing to be mauled and tinkered and revamped and translated about like an old trunk, from one nation, race, tribe, family, generation, or language, into another. It is a chemical gem, a delicate and precarious contexture of non-affinitive qualities, likely to go off at the touch of a feather in appro-

priate circumstances, or to lie flat and mute as a pancake if discomposed or mismanaged. There is no flower in nature more fragile of transport, more rooted in the specific. Every jest has its season; it flourishes and dies. Every man has some sly chuckle inside of his own teeth. Every two who live together in a house, if they live happily, train up some droll mummeries mutual to them, but which would seem pretty foolish exposed to the public view. It was a unique genius that Charles Lamb had, to so domesticate his readers and win them to his whims, that these inside familiar fooleries of his became the property of the whole world. For humorists who are less gifted with a very possessing grace of spirit, it is necessary to play upon impulses that are common at least to a considerable group, and can be relied upon to be in a state of appetite almost all the time.

CHAPTER V

HUMOR AND HOSTILITY

One of the impulses most often relied upon to supply the positive current in a humorous passage is the impulse to fight. It appears that men bring out of their animal past a disposition which, if left uninhibited by reflection or by standards of cultural propriety, would settle most disagreements with a trial by battle. When two roosters cross paths, in no matter how peaceful a pursuit of summer grasshoppers, they automatically bridle and "pick on" each other. They give a fair picture of healthy but unreflective life, and I suppose that if our bodies went along in a semiconscious state of business, they would behave in somewhat the same fashion. For whatever gentle thing our culture may make out of us, we are each born with the brain and nervous system of a timid yet belligerent savage, and we achieve that gentility not without the checking of many little continual impulses of wrath and retaliation. These may be imagined to become dammed up in the course of time, into a great reservoir of abstract hostility in the parts of our brain that are not conscious, and this reservoir can be tapped at any moment by any one who will offer us an opportunity to pick on a fellow savage with propriety and no danger. And humor, because it is upon its negative side play-

ful, and upon its positive side concealed and secondary and not too straightly spoken, offers such an opportunity in a most engaging form. It is a facile kind of humor, therefore, to arouse in us any light attitude of expectation, and then, in the very act of disappointing that, give us the opportunity to take a good resounding crack at some poor fool.

An individual toward whom we cherish the eternal hope of this opportunity is the professional optimist, the rotund charitable ready talker, who makes a fat living supporting with his breath the *status quo*. A joker will show us the round legs of this gentleman on tour down the middle of an East Side street crowded with hot rubbish and flies and animated children—"What's all this talk about the death-rate?" he shouts. "These kids are *alive!*" Is it not clear that while these words cheat us of the slight logical satisfaction they seemed to hold out, they offer in the same instant a more stimulating pleasure, that of scorning the fool who said them?

Thomas Hobbes was so much impressed by this joy of the hostile stroke, which he described with true barbaric appreciation as a feeling of "sudden glory," that he made it the basis of a general explanation of laughter. And long before Hobbes—indeed, ever since the birth of psychology—philosophers have been informing the world that the essence of humor is ridicule, that laughter is always *at* somebody, that jokes are always *on* somebody, that comic emotion is the same thing as scorn or the feeling of one's own

superiority. It is a mistake that arises naturally out of the frequent occurrence of this feeling among the positive values that enter into the creation of jokes. But a joke is not a single feeling; it is an emotional process. And the thing that makes a person whom we scorn comic, and not merely contemptible, is that our scorn enters into that process at a point where we ourselves have just been baffled and deprived of some other satisfaction. And usually it will have been our active sympathy with that very person which has been baffled. For we have a tendency to inward imitation so impetuous that, when nothing opposes it, we actually accompany every one whom we see or imagine pursuing or attempting anything. We look forward to his success, and when he is foiled, we also are foiled. But in the very discomfiture of our sympathy, itself humorous, we find a treat for our antipathy, which waits ready in the background, and so we are twice justified in laughing. It is the peculiar readiness of this antipathy, this repressed genius for hostile combat, combined with the inevitable coincidence of its most appropriate occasions with a funny disappointment of our sympathy, that gives it so predominant a place in comedy and wit. Ridicule is not the original or characteristic kind of comedy or wit; it is merely the easiest kind to create. Its prevalence is not due to the nature of the comic, but to the nature of man.

Aristophanes created a great deal of satiric laughter along the sides of the Acropolis at the expense of the poet Euripides, and we may recall one of his fine gibes

as a sufficiently classic example of this humor that laughs with the pale ghost of a sneer. The scene was laid in the next world, where a trial was in progress as to which of the two poets, Æschylus or Euripides, should sit by the throne of God as the Master of Tragedy. Euripides was found to have an extraordinary advantage in this trial because he had his tragedies right on hand, they all having died with him!

No audience, I am sure, could fail of a taste of sudden glory in this joke on Euripides. And yet both the suddenness and the glory might be there, if it were simply stated with sufficient force and gesture that the tragedies of Euripides are dead. To state that Euripides has an advantage, and when our appetite is just reaching out *with his* to grasp that advantage, suddenly to present in the very heart of it the most square and overwhelming *disadvantage*—that is a joke. That gives us the pleasure, not only of enjoying Euripides's discomfiture, but of enjoying it with comic laughter and emotion.

It is true—as Horace and Cicero and Molière and George Meredith and Henri Bergson and many other thoughtful men have set forth—that this kind of laughter plays a great part as a social corrective, and that derisive humor is a fine weapon. So much more sheer and startling a weapon it is than scorn, that I find it surprising any one should ever have been content to identify the two. We bring a certain instinctive neural mechanism into play when we scorn a person, and if that person succumbs a little and not too much,

we derive a strong satisfaction from our success. The onlookers, if our scorn is magnetic and the occasion appropriate, may be led along with us to that satisfaction. But if, in addition to our scorn, we bring also another instinctive mechanism, the sense of humor, giving ourselves and them the opportunity to draw from a new source a far more agreeable and tonic satisfaction, it is plain that our ascendancy over the victim is greatly enhanced. His state of debasement has now become the source of a dear and infectious pleasure to the whole company, who are at play, and he will have a hard time making them let go of it. Is not that an explanation that really explains the superior power of ridicule and satire over scorn?

I suspect that the reason why so many philosophers have deemed all laughter to be of the derisive flavor is that they dreaded the prick of it. What we learn from their theories of "sudden glory" and the "feeling of superiority," is that they hated to be laughed at. Hobbes hated to be laughed at, I am sure, and so did Plato, for he was always advising his friends that it is not philosophic to laugh very loud. And the reason why we hate to be laughed at, is that we experience a *feeling of inferiority* on such occasions, that is indeed logical and involved in the essence of the case. For no matter how truly the laughers may hasten to assure us that they are not hostile, but only happy—they feel no scorn but rather a delighted love of our natural blunder—still there remains the fact that we *are* inferior. We have supplied that stumbling

which alone could cause their humorous recoil, and we know it, and only a very active humorous instinct of our own can make us enjoy that in their presence which we might well have enjoyed if they were away. Men are not so extremely avid of sudden glory, but they have a sensitive distaste for the sudden descent from glory, and this modest trait has helped much to make Hobbes's erroneous theory live after him.

We are almost as timid as we are belligerent by hereditary nature. And although our timid impulses find freer vent in the conditions of modern life than our belligerent ones, still they too are repressed and dammed up by culture and opinion, and will seek a vent with relief if occasion offers. No doubt there are people who possess a more acute military fervor than I do, but when I first heard of that brave soldier who was always to be found where the bullets are thickest—in the ammunition wagon—I can well remember how the fine march of heroic meaning and emotion was suddenly exploded, and there flowed in to fill up the vacuum another meaning and a feeling of most happy and concrete relief. It would be folly to tell me that I was scorning the soldier. I was with him in the ammunition wagon. And there are others, I venture to believe, who, no matter how heroically they may behave in the circumstances where social opinion demands it, will gladly avail themselves of the little opportunity that a joke offers to crawl into a hole and behave naturally.

CHAPTER VI

HUMOR AND SEXUALITY

It seems especially surprising that any one should have thought to identify humor with hostile and egoistic emotion, when another passion of our nature stands at least equal to these in supplying the joy ends of the most popular jokes, and that is the passion of sex. Just as Hobbes long ago drew the attention of cultivated men to that fine heritage of the bloody and barbaric in their bosoms, Sigmund Freud now compels them to confess that their bodies are great surging tanks full of lust and suppressed carnal hungers, which they draw up into their minds and transform into this strong energy of interest that plays forth upon a variety of things, but never exhausts its source. We are always ready to be happy in a taste of those poignant parts of life that for life's sake we conceal, and the swift sharp force with which these imprisoned hungers will seize upon any least gap or stumbling of speech or idea, to rush in and declare that they have been implied, is the one thing upon which every humorist in every company can rely. He can so fully and so fatuously rely upon it, that we shall have to retract here the statement that ridicule is the easiest kind of joke to create. The easiest kind of joke to create is one in which there is no crux or quality what-

ever in the negation—no interesting playful recoil—but just a sniggering intimation that there might be, and that if there were, some sexual act or exhibition might come in to take the place of what had been intended. One need say nothing indeed, but merely dwell with a persistent eye, as Uncle Toby does in "Tristram Shandy," upon some feature of the chimney-piece, in order to get a witless laugh out of people who are all filled up with unsatisfied curiosity as to things of similar conformation. The Anglo-Saxons are more commonly in this condition, I think, than the southern races of Europe, and it is only among them and the Germans that the humor of the naughty kitten variety has enjoyed a very high popularity. The furtive smirk is absent from a Frenchman's enjoyment of sex wit, and playful humor the more present. Rabelais swings open the doors and marches in like an orphan giant, where Sterne sits lurking at a peep-hole in fear of his parents. And people of Rabelaisian license, people who feel free at least to experience in reality the things that they desire to experience, are capable of a more fastidiously humorous taste, as well as a more playful pleasure in sexual jokes, than people who are too thirsty for implications. For them it remains to hold up some standard of the real art of humor even upon this topic, and not rush like a flock of spinster hens with indiscriminate cackling after the least flicker of a sexual sensation.

There is no doubt that a great deal of our pleasure in the most casual humor is flavored with an emotion

from the sphere of sex—our conscious attention being at play with the negative, while our unconscious takes its fill of a positive satisfaction we do not attend to. Persons of very maidenly mind will often laugh loudly at a break in meaning which without its sexual implication would hardly provoke a smile, and yet if that implication were consciously apprehended would make them blush and not laugh at all. Freud likes to tell us that all the really hilarious satisfactions in humor, even those of the sudden glory kind, can be induced by his science of psychoanalysis to come in and declare themselves fundamentally sexual. But this does not seem very generous toward the companionable variety of nature. Like the statement of Hobbes, instead of defining the general character of humor, it seems to define the sphere of his paramount interest in it. Freud has made himself a wise and wonderful scientist of sex, and has given a gift of illumination to the world not second to that which Hobbes gave, and so we can forgive him if he somewhat overstrains the generalization, and tends to carry us back to a contemplation of oneness almost as bad as that of the sickly mystics whom he knows how to cure. He has at least lifted a great incubus of shame from the shoulders of humanity, and given the boon of candor to a poor animal desperately endeavoring to become a man.

A little girl who was just waking to the existence of a problem in these matters composed a love-story which proceeded somewhat as follows: "Once upon a

time there was a boy and girl who loved each other, and they wanted to get married, but they couldn't afford it, so they decided to be good until he could earn some money. Well, on his way home, he found a purse containing a million dollars, and they got married, and the next day they had twins, which proves that virtue brings its own reward."

We share, of course, the conviction of this author that virtue brings its own reward—we have known at least that it gets none from any other source—and we feel the same wonderful law of necessity by which the hero and heroine of every tale that is told must be good. We are naturally somewhat taken aback, therefore, to learn in the same words in which we are being told of the goodness of these two, that they were not good. It is a shock to our sensibilities, but then, after all, we are not sorry—we have been good ourselves, or tried to, and that is enough! And so our laughter is a little more joyful than seems appropriate to the author even in so extraordinary a triumph of what is right. It is a joy of released impulse from the unconscious, blowing up from that cavern to swell the sails of a laugh that is already on its way. That is the fact which Freud has so well compelled us to understand.

CHAPTER VII

HUMOR AND TRUTH

LAUGHTER has perhaps a more elementary—or at least a more strong and spasmodic—connection with states of triumphant lust and battle cruelty than with any other satisfactions except those of the social instinct itself. And hence that peculiar loon-like, hysterical, crying giggle that comes out of some people whenever in joking either of these springs is touched. It is not humor, but glee, that makes them whoop so loud at cruel gibes and obscene quips and mimicries. And glee, while it may be a rank and ringing kind of pleasure, is of no more special pertinence to the art of joking than any other pleasure toward which we have a commonly unsatisfied hunger. So much indeed of what is real and strong and tasting of good earth in every direction is pressed down and out of our conscious or conversational selves by various acquired tricks of virtue and decorum, that we may properly place Truth herself beside sex and sudden glory as a chief source of the joy motive in popular jokes. We are always hungry for the simple truth.

Not only the proprieties of civilization but the more inward postulates of self-consciousness—consistency and good faith and loyalty and emotional stability

and resolute adherence—all these excellent presumptions insulate us from the flux of reality even through the portals of our own hearts. We are not free to experience the world's being, or even our own beings within it. We are prisoners in a mist of pretense. And to shock us with the playful precipitation of that mist, and yet in the very shock to warm us with a clear serious glimpse of the naked movement of life, is a universal and joyful way of joking. We can all be honest playfully and for half a second. And to be honest without fear is an experience that may fitly be placed in comparison with the ecstasies of the saints. It is a most wholesome way to be redeemed —to be purged, in these forever-recurring quick flashes, from the original sin of self-consciousness. I can say, for instance, that if there is one thing I cannot endure about the learned, it is the information they possess. And I offer you there a little absurdity conjoined with the glimpse of a considerable interior truth. But to set down in serious and cold visibility the substance of that truth—which is certainly of the color neither of sex nor sudden glory—would exceed the strength of my candor.

Aristophanes, the slap-stick comedian of the Acropolis, boasted that he was after all "the best of poets, the one who was reckless enough to speak truth among the Athenians." He spoke truth among the Athenians to such point of uproar that he was arrested during the Peloponnesian War and tried for sedition. We do not know what the charge was in that early

misadventure, but we have the copy of a later play in which his comic hero negotiated for himself and family a "separate peace" with Sparta, his reason being that he was not interested in international politics, and wanted to go home. That was an absurd performance, to be sure, a shattering of all the tragic prepossessions of the hour—but was not half the value of that absurdity its truth to what lay covered up through all those dark days in the hearts of the Athenian people? One of our own comedists, Art Young, was arrested and tried for the same crime as Aristophanes during our own war of the worlds. And when he was put upon the witness-stand and asked in a terrible voice of accusation, "What did you *mean*, Mr. Young, by those pictures?" he who had so long delighted us with the originality of his humor, could only look down with a kind of bewildered belligerence in his good gray eyes and answer: "I meant nothing but what everybody *knows!*"

It is not usually, indeed, a new truth, or truth as the result of any high intellectual analysis, whose force the humorist calls in to help us enjoy a playful shock. It is just the simple reality of feeling or sagacity of judgment that was already lurking in us. He may have no motive to instruct us, or improve our morals, or try to mix honesty with politics. His motive may be only to make good, strong, enduring, universal jokes. But the opportunity afforded by this contrast between the simple and eternal things in our hearts, and the grand procession of hysterical and temporary banner

and flapdoodle parading through our minds as thoughts, he cannot possibly resist. As an artist he is compelled to drop bombs of honesty in that procession.

It is not a correct statement, however, of the relation between these two things to say that "humor is truth." Humor is often the last weapon in the hands of those who are menaced by a truth. Lacking the force or shamelessness to stand off truth's champions in sober combat, these skulking jokers—among whom I am afraid we often find the celebrated Doctor Johnson—have the trick of getting behind a joke and disappearing. What they do is to meet a serious thrust with a flatly frivolous and irrelevant rebuff, which would not be tolerated at all if it did not conceal also the serious satisfaction of some *other* interest than the one involved—perhaps an interest in some other truth—and thus permit the listener's attention to slide off in a new direction and find rest. That is what Cicero meant when he advised his pupils in oratory that joking "very often disposes of extremely ugly matters that will not bear to be cleared up by proofs." And for those orators who may find themselves on the side of the proofs, I offer this corresponding advice: Do not try to match wits with a Ciceronian joker, for you are retained and he is free; enjoy his joke as a perfectly frivolous pleasure, and then return with a reluctant force to serious speech, reserving your own wit until you are again in command. You will thus rob him of the appearance of having parried and thrust, when all he did was to jump out of the way of a wound.

Humor is not truth—but truth, under the terms of this elaborate process we call civilized life, is humorous. And those who are not satisfied with the classical authority upon this point will be interested to know that Charlie Chaplin has the same thing to say of his art as Aristophanes.

"It is telling them the plain truth of things," he replied instantly, when I asked him what it is that he does to people when he makes them laugh. "It is bringing home to them by means of a shock the sanity of a situation which they think is insane. When I walk up and slap a fine lady, for instance, because she gave me a contemptuous look, it is really right! They won't admit it, but it's right, and that is why they laugh.

"I make them *conscious of life*. 'You think this is it, don't you?' I say, 'well, it isn't, but *this* is, see?' And then they laugh."

I doubt if any joker ever gave a more penetrating analysis of his art. Its lovers will agree—and the lovers of every deeply moving art of humor—that it is full of the sudden uncoverings of a simple, original, and more purely burning element of reality, from which we have all somehow got intricately lost, and from which we still hold ourselves aloof, so that when his relentlessly playful hand uncovers it, our very gesture of the moment has been baffled, and yet our deepest wish drinks deep.

There are people, of course, who lack altogether these deeper wishes, or have them so well stifled that

they seem really satisfied to dwell forever in the false fronts of decorum. I suppose they cannot come down to the face of reality even alone in the bathtub. And these people are resentful of the humor that reveals, because it shakes their confidence and frightens them. They call it "levity," and wish to have it segregated and rendered irrelevant, confined to the "funny page," or the "comic paper," included in parentheses, or at least stigmatized with an exclamation-point, or a pointed voice, or something else to indicate that it is not to be taken seriously or allowed to spread. Stanton called it "levity" when Abraham Lincoln endeavored to bring a little of the light of sagacious laughter into those stern meetings of the war cabinet.

People who manifest this asperity or uncouth stupor at the play of humor through the serious enterprises of life must be either heavy of interest, so that they cannot shift within the time required from some end they were bent upon, to the new and perhaps greater one, or else they are shallow and timorous and unaccustomed to dwell with these greater ends—the passions and realities—even in their own hearts. A man whose interest is agile, and whose converse with life and death is mature, does not have to have a bell rung and a flag put up every time anything is to be taken humorously. He does not regard humor as an interlude. He is continually in hope that a bit of the framework will break back and something real look through the stucco front of our culture, and when not hoping that it will, he is contriving that it shall.

For although he may be too fond of his own comfort to attack the sham and superficialities of man with anger and riot, he could not quite endure them if they were not continually shot through with humorous acknowledgments to the source and reality of life. To him seriousness in these weak exploits and waterish matters of conversation and business is the interlude, and humor the real engagement. A true joke is a reverence that we do to nature, an expiation for having so denied and betrayed her in our lives. It is at once a glad acceptance of failure in the puny enterprise upon which our mind is bent and a grateful acknowledgment of some greater good that she was holding out in her hands.

CHAPTER VIII

THE HUMOR OF QUANTITY

SCIENCE is never so proudly happy as when it has got rid of qualities, and reduced all the enjoyable glories of this world to mere quantity and number. And we need not be surprised if our own hypothesis takes on a persuasive simplicity when we apply it to the humor that arises, and the pointed jokes that are created, by a manipulation of the mere quantity or degree of things. One need but magnify a subject plausibly enough to carry along the attention, and yet extremely enough to make belief or imagination impossible, and no matter what he is talking about—it need not be a fish that he has caught—if his hearers are in a state of playful rapport with him, their disappointment will be humorous. And one need but speak with a winning and believable manner words which are so slight and inadequate to the facts as to be of no sense or credibility whatever, and the same result will follow. We call the latter process, the humor of understatement, *irony;* and the humor of overstatement we call *exaggeration.* They are forms of humor which require no very brainy ingenuity, but only a certain agility of imagination, in their creators; and they are forms which reveal more simply than any others the perfect essence of what humor is.

It is not mere magnitude or braggadocio at which we laugh, nor is it minuteness or mere modesty of speech. Neither of these things begets humorous laughter until it goes to the point of impracticability. We laugh not at the much, but the *too much*, and not at the little, but the *too little*. We laugh, that is, in the course of a simple quantitative variation that is playful, exactly at the point where we should, if we did not laugh, experience a real balk or bewilderment of mind.

Imagine a person who has no sense of humor—and has not yet learned to relax and let pass when he sees others laughing—confronted with one of Rabelais's accounts of a drinking-bout or a light meal of victuals. Imagine him attending to Mark Twain's story of a night's effort to find his way back to bed in the dark. He will meet nothing witty here, nothing ingenious, sly, double-turned, paradoxical, or even unusual. Every inch of that night's journey he could duplicate out of his own personal recollection. And yet those inches are so wantonly multiplied, and their possibilities swelled out and extended, that by the time he reaches the conclusion—"I glanced furtively at my pedometer and found I had made 47 miles, but I did not care, for I had come out for a pedestrian tour anyway"—what can he do, this person who is without benefit of humor, but cry out in a kind of weak prayerful profanity: "O Lord, this is too much!" In these cries of the unprotected is revealed the exact nature of the thing they lack.

Mark Twain would have been at home among the Gargantuans. He and Rabelais both took an almost pathological delight in mere quantity and dimension. And yet we can find no more childlike example of the humor of understatement than that chapter of the "Pantagruellian Prognostications" beginning: "This year the stone-blind shall see but very little; the deaf shall hear but scurvily; the dumb shall not speak very plain; the rich shall be in somewhat a better case than the poor. . . ." And there is hardly a more celebrated ironic joke in history than Mark Twain's message from London at the time when he was reported dead in the New York newspapers—"The reports of my death are grossly exaggerated." The reason why those eight words became immortal, is that in the first place they are so natural and familiar in their general form as to *tempt our confidence,* and yet in the second place they are so related to the particular situation as to be concisely and absolutely *inadequate,* and yet again in the third place they are *made adequate*—their humor acquires a point—through the fact that Mark Twain must have been alive to utter them. So much is contained in so brief an experience. But the humorous heart of that experience was his saying too little plausibly—a thing at which we laughed for the same essential reason that we so often laugh at his plausible sayings of too much. Pointed and raised to a high point of distinction, it is the same kind of humor as that of the cheery passer who remarks that "It looks like rain" when the clouds have burst and the

town is standing in four feet of water. It is the kind of humor that Albert Einstein indulges in when he prefaces a volume on "The Special and General Theory of Relativity" with the hope that "This book may bring some one a few happy hours of suggestive thought!" The meaning is no doubt felicitous in direction, but it falls short in the amount.

It is proper to apply the name of *irony*, in the first place, to the elementary humor of understatement, not only because of its peculiar flavor, but because in its origin that is what the word implied. In Aristotle's ethics we find the two nouns, *ὁ ἀλαζὼν* and *ὁ εἴρων* set off against each other as opposites—the one meaning a man who "talks big," the other a dissembler, or one who avows less than he intends. And it was the application of this latter term to the peculiar humor of Socrates that gave popularity to that word *irony*, which has kept up all through the ages so delicate a balance between humor and the simple truth. Socrates would come up to some complacent citizen on the streets of Athens and ask him if he knew a certain thing. And when the citizen replied, "Of course," Socrates would say: "I just wanted to ask you, because I myself don't know anything, and I wondered if it would be possible for you to enlighten me a little." From such a beginning would ensue a conversation in which the ignorant folly of the citizen and the adroit profundity of his questioner became equally apparent.

Thus by a playful "saying little" Socrates was able

seriously to mean much. His irony was pointed. And the point of it was almost always this identity that he would succeed in creating between his own delusive modesty and the real humiliation of his opponent. And so it was natural that the word irony, from meaning understatement, came to acquire a flavor of mild and gentle-minded scorn—gentle, because in Socrates's thoughts there lurked always the serious opinion that if he did know more than others, it was but the knowledge of his own ignorance. Indeed it is the peculiar charm of his irony that it never completely confesses itself to be a joke. We are never quite sure whether Socrates is humorously understating himself, or whether he is simply the first and only man in creation who ever stated himself with enough hesitation to be accurate. The ironies of his successors usually reveal by some sheer impossibility in their *little* meaning, or by some excessive emphasis or irreverent delivery of it, that their real meaning is *big*.

There is but one philosopher who has ever tried to make of irony the same sustained and subtle art of holding us in doubt that Socrates did, and that is Thorstein Veblen, the author of "The Theory of the Leisure Class." He has not travelled away into a city of Birds or Frogs or Gargantuans or Lilliputians or Penguins or Angels, or any other of those animal or impossible regions, where he might have fun with humanity by talking about something else. He talks about humanity, and he delivers an attack upon its follies as profoundly derisive as any we have from the

hand of Swift or Voltaire, but he talks a language of scientific erudition so remote and abstract and preternaturally non-committal of emotion, that we cannot positively declare at any moment whether what he is saying is great science, or great irony, or whether perhaps it is both. He is a "dissembler" in the original sense, a man of whom we long to ask, yet would not for the world, *how much* he seriously means.

It may have surprised the reader to find irony and exaggeration included together as a single general kind of humor. It will surprise him more to reflect that the two cannot in many cases be distinguished. We may say that Socrates understated his knowledge, or that he exaggerated his ignorance; we may say that Veblen dissembles his emotional meaning, or that he puts up a vast pretense of intellectual abstraction. It makes no difference, because the quantities involved here are intensive rather than extensive. Even in the stories of Mark Twain and Rabelais, where the things magnified are extensive enough, our perception of them is still in our own heads, and we can view them as examples of a ridiculous "want of moderation" if we choose. And so by a little perceptive shift or casuistry any exaggeration may be viewed as irony, and any irony as exaggeration, and the view that actually prevails in a given example is not always easy to determine.

Laurence Sterne tells us in his defense of Hobbies about a certain great doctor, Kunastrokius, who at his leisure hours took "the greatest delight imaginable in combing of asses' tails, and plucking the hairs out with

his teeth, though he had tweezers always in his pocket." And although I find that concluding phrase, appearing with so much inappropriate aplomb at the tag-end of so ludicrous a portrait, a delicately humorous thing, yet I have never been able to say whether it comes as an exaggeration of the great doctor's devotion, or whether it adds a flavor of understatement to what had gone before—as though that would have been a sufficiently decorous procedure had the tweezers been wanting. It is clear only that it disturbs me, not with the nature of what has been said—for that I have already gathered—but with its degree.

It needs, then, no special explanation that the word *irony*, having named the jokes which say less in order to mean more, came also to include those which say more in order to mean less. It came to include all kinds of quantitative humor with a point. And since quantities that are diminished sufficiently become the negative of what they were, it needs no further principle to explain those extreme ironies which are statements neither of less nor more, but of the exact opposite of what they mean. They too are quantitative. They provoke our laughter with a minus after letting us expect a plus.

"Ye thought he was a bad man," said Mr. Dooley, "but I knew him for a single-minded innocent ol' la'ad who niver harmed anny wan excipt f'r gain an' was incapable iv falsehood outside iv business."

It is obvious that these forms of speech are very handy to the purposes of ridicule. And ridicule is so handy to the purposes of life, that irony has almost

come to mean upon the common tongue a lightly hostile or satiric speech of any kind. It has lost the fine sense of measure that it had. But there is no necessary connection between irony and the hostile attitude. There is no pride nor biting in that exquisite title of Charles Lamb's essay, "On the Inconveniences Resulting from Being Hanged"—a pure and perfect irony. And although Socrates by talking small used to triumph greatly over his playmates, we recognize the same ironic flavor in Henry Fielding, when he talks big in order to humble himself before them.

"As this is one of those deep observations," he says, "which very few readers can be supposed capable of making themselves, I have thought proper to lend them my assistance; but this is a favour rarely to be expected in the course of my work. Indeed, I shall seldom or never so indulge him, unless in such instances as this, where nothing but the inspiration with which we writers are gifted can possibly enable any one to make the discovery."

We all employ the art of irony for purposes of praise as well as blame. We say, "He is *some* dancer!" and mean by our excessive emphasis upon the slightness of it, that he is a *great deal* of a dancer. Or we say, "He is a great dancer, he is!" and mean by the emphatic repetition that he is *little or no* dancer at all. In both these ironies—conventionalized, but still a little playfully alive in spirit—we can see the original sense and bearing of the term. We ought to try to be as wise as our language, and not let the delicate per-

ceptive flavors of such terms decay. We ought to apply the word *irony* to the simple humor of understatement, in the first place; then let it include jokes, whether derisive or not, whose point is the identity of saying too little with meaning much; and then jokes whose saying too much is a meaning of little; and finally those sayings that are directly opposed to their meanings; and there we ought to stop. For all of these ways of joking are distinguished from others by the fact that, in depriving us of the goal we originally set out after, they do not provide something of alien quality in its place, but simply shift back the direction of our intention, so that we get either the same thing in greater or less degree, or its exact opposite.

Irony is the humor that we attribute to nature in her play with man, because nature is always presenting us with facts. And facts, although extreme and exciting enough in their own character, never travel very far in the direction of our romantic locutions. They come along after we have been talking them up, with a decidedly Socratic manner and expression of unpretentious adamant, amounting to very little, and yet amounting to so much more than all our talk. Reality is the supreme artist of understatement, and the ironies of Fate wear a most illuminating smile. They show very clearly to the pliant-hearted what the point of a joke is, for they offer us in the form of humility the very prize that we were grabbing in the form of pride.

CHAPTER IX

PRACTICAL HUMOR

A PAINFUL or unpleasant feeling may arise in us in two different ways. It may arise from our losing or failing to attain an experience that we want, and it may arise from our receiving an experience that we do not want. A similar distinction can be drawn among the forms of that play-effigy of pain which we call humorous emotion. There is a humor of *disappointment*, properly so called—and this was what Kant observed when he said that laughter arises from "a strained expectation that is suddenly brought to nothing." And there is a humor of disturbance, or the playfully disagreeable—and this was observed by Aristotle, who defined the laughable as the "harmlessly ugly." Kant did not explain why any disappointment should ever give us pleasure, and Aristotle did not tell how the ugly could ever actually be "harmless," but each of these philosophers perceived one aspect of the veritable essence of the sense of humor.

When our playful trend is forward to some end or object of interest, and we are simply tripped up, or dropped into a trap, or left staring at nothing, the humor that results is of a rather hard and prosaic quality, as all feelings are that occur in a mood of enterprise. And if we give to this the name of prac-

tical humor, we shall appropriately distinguish it from that more liquid and irradiant feeling that arises when some present object, or some group of qualities actually perceived, is laughable. I think that the words *absurdity* and *comic* and *wit* and *joke* apply rather to the practical kind of humor, and the words *ludicrous*, and *comical*, and *droll*, and *humorous* are used oftener of the poetic.

Those imps and April witlings whose main end of being lies in the elaborate bedevilment of their neighbors, will see that I do not mean by practical humor what they mean by a practical joke. They mean a prepared contrivance for getting playful enjoyment out of the serious discomfiture of others. And in so far as these contrivances are humorous, and not merely a direct overflow of neighborly hostility, their humor is, of course, practical. But practical humor, in the large sense in which I contrast it with humor that is poetic, need not be deliberately perpetrated, nor does it require the discomfiture of others. It requires only the discomfiture, in some purposeful creature, of a practical tendency, and the presence of some humorous creature, whether the same one or another, who is able to take that event playfully. The advantage of having these discomfitures befall others, and ourselves receiving them only as in a kind of emotional mirror, is that we are then very free to take them playfully. We are relieved of the shock, and we do not have to consider the consequences. The range of our enjoyment is thus enormously increased—although even here

sympathy sets a bound, and we are not most of us able to perceive any loss entailing real anguish as humorous, unless the persons involved are far away, or long dead, or imaginary, and we merely hear the tale of their troubles. But whether the joke is on us or Saint Anthony, the interior result in its negative aspect is essentially the same. It is a disappointment which *for some reason* we are able to take playfully. And nothing will lead us wider astray from the psychology of practical humor than the opinion that we are able to take playfully only the disappointments of others.

"One can always make a child laugh," said Léon Dumont, "by pointing to a spot upon its clothes that does not exist!" And that is the elementary atom of a jest—a thing at which we and not the child should laugh, if looking down upon others were the essence of the beauty of such things. For my part, I have found the most hilarious of practical laughter to arise when all of those present are involved in the same predicament, and the humor is increased through sympathetic reverberation without the possibility of derision. Suppose, for example, that the whole family have got all dressed up in their Sunday clothes, and boarded a two-seated vehicle in the direction of the village church; and suppose that the horse does not concur in the piety of the general intention, but refuses to move out of his tracks. Then all these elaborate preparations, and the continued obtrusion of a purpose in their still sitting the way that was to be forward, begin to enlarge themselves and display them-

selves, until they succeed in giving to that mere absence of an event a quality that is positively and enormously comic. The young brother jumps out to gather some straw, and lights a fire under the horse, thinking to demonstrate the well-advertised superiority of man over nature, and the horse feeling his belly ache backs them all up into the barn. There is little that being left out of it could add to the glory of that situation.

It is an absurd situation. And *absurdity*, I believe, is the best general name we can choose for that humor of a practical kind which is purely negative, or in which the positive values are too fine and vaporous to be identified. It is a "reduction to absurdity" of the whole attitude of our wills. In the particular kind of activity called thinking, however, a special name has already been applied to these practical comings-to-nothing. They have been called *bulls*. And because it is so hard to understand why we should enjoy a mere nothing, they have usually been imputed to a people we like to laugh about, and called *Irish bulls*. But it seems likely that this word was derived in the first place from the Latin *bulla*, which means *a bubble*. And an Irish bull may very well be defined as any remark which appears rotund and meaningful enough, until our apprehension actually arrives upon it, when there is simply nothing there. Its plausibility is the only thing to distinguish it from pure nonsense. But this plausibility can be so finely and fancifully developed as of itself to have a colored charm, and then the

nothing can be landed in our laps with so dexterous and graceful a temper of playfulness, that we would be glad to have these bubbles blown before us all day long. It is a genius for such glowing light logical absurdities—a genius for making fairy-delicate plausibilities out of intellectual nothing—that gives much of its unique flavor to the humor of Lewis Carroll in "Alice in Wonderland." It is the kind of humor that we might naturally expect of a mathematician at play.

"'What sort of things do *you* remember best?' Alice ventured to ask.

"'Oh—things that happened the week after next,' the Queen replied in a careless tone. 'For instance now,' she went on, sticking a large piece of plaster on her finger as she spoke, 'there's the King's Messenger. He's in prison now being punished; and the trial doesn't even begin till next Wednesday: and of course the crime comes last of all.'

"'Suppose he never commits the crime?' said Alice.

"'That would be all the better, wouldn't it?' the Queen said, as she bound the plaster round her finger with a bit of ribbon."

Kant was right in insisting that it must be an absolute nothing into which our practical expectation is transformed, if we are to laugh with humor. It must be a nothing—or at least a *worth nothing*—from the standpoint of that expectation. But if from some other standpoint the nothing turns out to be also something, then we have still the absurdity, the humor of the bull, and we have this positive thing besides.

And such happy combinations, when they are deliberately perpetrated in conversation, we describe as *wit*. A witty joker may be likened to a man who, having hidden a gold piece beside the path we are treading, or having discovered at least that one lies hidden there, contrives to trip us up in such a way that we shall find it. To stumble and find something is to enjoy a joke.

Cicero tells us how his friend Nasica avenged himself upon a Roman gentleman by the name of Ennius, upon whom he had paid a call. He had been informed by the maid that Ennius was not at home; and when it came about that Ennius called upon him, he stuck his head out of the window and said: "I am not at home."

"What are you talking about?" said Ennius. "Don't I know your voice?"

"Why, you rascal," said Nasica, "I believed your maid when she told me you were not at home, and you won't believe me even when I tell you myself!"

Is not this classical Latin joke most obviously, in the mere form of argument, an Irish bull—a piece of logically plausible and yet complete nonsense? But even while we enjoy that nonsense, do we not enjoy also a certain vague sense that pervades it—a kind of diffused vapor-douche of the short and ugly shot one might direct at Ennius under the circumstances? So it is that "comings to nothing" and "sudden glories" are combined in the most common form of adult fighting play; and so it is that two such utterly diverse

opinions as those of Hobbes and Kant about the cause of laughter could stand up with equal authority so long as they have.

Repartee is the name we give to this common form of play, and the rules of the game might be laid down somewhat as follows: One of the contestants propounds a thesis which gives glory to himself, or ignominy to his opponent; his opponent so manipulates the implications of that thesis that the propounder's glory disappears, and his own appears in its place; the propounder then further manipulates it, if he can, to restore his own glory; and so on, until one or the other of them cries enough. An example which figures in the translation of Freud's book about wit is the reply of Charles Sumner to a minister who asked him impertinently why he did not go into the South with his antislavery speeches where slavery exists. His reply was: "You are trying to save souls from hell, aren't you? Why don't you go there?"

Freud would have us believe that the pith of this wit lies in the "eluding of a censorship," the saying of a thing indirectly which good manners would otherwise prohibit. And we must acknowledge that such a thing is accomplished—it was a very genteel way of telling a minister to go to hell. But nobody not occupied with proving a theory could possibly identify its gentility with its humor. Humor lay in the fact that the minister went to hell on the wings of his own logic. His condemnation of Sumner was not answered; it was not contradicted; it was simply brought to noth-

ing, and Sumner's condemnation of him allowed to appear in its place—a victory according to the essential rules of the game. Many people are free from the censorship of good manners, but few would not prefer that jocular victory to the sober damnation of an opponent.

A form of enjoyment that is very far away from these quips and privy taunts is our enjoyment of the naïve. And it requires a very generous theory of humor to bring the naïve blunder in under its shelter without crowding out the witty joke. The trick has given much idle occupation to the philosophers of laughter. And if our own theory proves capable of this ample spread of wing, it is because, in the first place, we refuse to be entirely carried away by that sophisticated distinction between our own experience and the observed experience of others, and in the second place, we recur always to the words pleasure and displeasure, or to no less general names of feeling, in giving our account both of humor and of jokes. A naïve blunder can be shown to give a shock which *might be* displeasure to those who enjoy its humor, and to give a rich and positive pleasure besides.

Remember, for example, the schoolboy who defined a *marsupial* upon his examination paper as "an animal who has a pouch in the middle of his stomach into which he can retire when he is hard pressed." That is absurd in the same perfectly logical way that the humor of Lewis Carroll is absurd. It is, in fact, an "Irish bull." But it is more than that, for besides

failing to deliver the proposed meaning to our critical judgment, it does present some other thing to our affectionate attention. It presents that schoolboy himself, earnestly and anxiously trying to remember his text-book—the words "hard pressed" being a stock in trade with all text-books. We see him bending over his paper, personifying and continuing before our eyes, in spite of logic, physiology, and all else to the contrary, the original meaningful impulse which he has aroused and disappointed, and we have a rare opportunity to enjoy his innocence. Surely there is nothing in the nature of humor to prevent that enjoyment, or dry up the feeling of tender sympathy with which any creature having a human heart must see the picture of a child undergoing an examination. So far from scorning him, we love him suddenly. We resolve that he shall be remembered among the martyrs who have suffered greatly for the happiness of mankind. And beside him, for the still further illumination of posterity, the little girl who said that "*Saturnalia* was the name of the wolf that suckled Romeo and Juliette."

These blunders are beautiful. And naïve absurdities are often more beautiful, even when they are not more humorous, than absurdities of the voluntary kind. They offer us a variety of positive satisfactions which the clown or the deliberate wit-snapper can only simulate—the satisfaction of loving an innocent mind, as in the example I have discussed; or the satisfaction of glorying over it, as in the classic theory; or as Freud tells us, the satisfaction of realizing through it some

wished-for thing which our own sophistication forbids. Any of these affirmative values may flow in to enrich our enjoyment of a naïve blunder. But even in the blunder itself there is a special shining out of comic color, because it is not only humor in the midst of play that suddenly appears, but playful humor in the midst of serious life. For a similar reason we laugh more generously at a humorous thing which "really happened" than at the same thing if it is offered as a "funny story"—a fact which comic editors need to have perpetually in mind. A naïve absurdity actually observed, or related to us while in a mood of serious belief, has the special virtue of lightning when the clouds are dark. A sudden rift, and a bright flood of illuminating laughter breaks over us, as though we heard the bell ring for recess in the midst of our lessons. We are at play, but real life is our plaything.

The form of practical wit most utterly remote from this beautifully humorous condition is the play upon words, the pun. Indeed there has always been some dispute among the captains and superintendents of polite laughter as to whether there *can* be humor in a pun—and whether we may be permitted to smile, for instance, at that answer of one of Thomas Hood's heroes to his wife's attempt to fortify him against his sorrows:

> "I know I'm not so fortified, nor fiftyfied, as you."

For my part I think we ought to be allowed a slight liberty of choice in this matter, and that a sharp dif-

ference ought to be recognized between those puns which rely too much upon their negative action, and those which offer some good strong joy in the recovery. The negative action of a pun in its purity is, of course, merely the nonsensical use of a word or syllable—a thing which Shakespeare seems to have been childlike enough to enjoy, but which we do not recognize, as we do mere conceptual absurdities, with a special name. We call verbal absurdities *puns* only when they offer, besides the humor of pure nonsense, some reasonable excuse for their intrusion—some meaning in another sense, or at least some vocal likeness or identity with a thing already said. We need not pay them much respect, however, unless they go beyond the point of reasonable excuse, and give us a warm recompense. For their intrusion is in a peculiar way graceless and out of true connection with our life.

Words are in ordinary speech merely the material carriers of meaning or image or emotion. They are containers, necessary but negligible, and our attention is not directed upon them. We do not "expect" them to do their work appropriately, but just assume they will. And when they fail, no matter how dexterously the failure may be arranged, we do not experience a simple and immediate disappointment. We have rather to abandon our whole expectation, and begin over in a more shallow attitude in which we can realize the part played in it by these containers. For that reason a verbal absurdity cannot be briefly and directly felt as humorous experience, and even the pun

with a point—the failure of a particle of speech to mean one thing combined with its success in meaning another—startles our admiration more than it stimulates our sense of humor. It is not a part of what we are doing. It requires a pause, an act of recognition. Even in the most loose and foolish of hilarious discourse, a pun comes a little alien, like the attempts at congeniality of a drunkard or of a person whose reason is slightly touched. Indeed there are forms of insanity in which the deeper associations of words seem to become dried up, and a "flight of ideas" occurs, which is like the racing of a motor disgeared from the machine it was intended to move, and in this condition puns are sometimes seen to fly off in the most extraordinary swarms and galaxies. It is a condition that any one can reproduce by forcing himself to talk more rapidly than he can think; he will then see in what kind of mind it is that these verbal sports have a natural and substantial flavor.

King James the First seems to have had a mind of this sort, and to have been so addicted to the idiotic fun it supplied him, that he would not promote any one to high place in the English kingdom who had not some skill and fertility as a punster. The result was an elegant epidemic, in which by means of social suggestion puns acquired a value which was not in any way connected with humorous emotion. As Addison tells us, the pun was now "delivered with great gravity from the pulpit, or pronounced in the most solemn manner at the council table. The greatest authors,

in their most serious works, made frequent use of puns. The sermons of Bishop Andrews, and the tragedies of Shakespeare are full of them. . . . The sinner was punned into repentance." It is sad to record that, in spite of Addison's hygienic advice and example, England has not yet altogether recovered from this affliction, and these obtrusions of the vocable show a degree of social and literary audacity upon that island which they have never attained, to my knowledge, in any other part of the planet. At least I count it a point of legitimate pride in my own country, infested though it is with that other little superfecund pest of inheritance from the Court of Saint James, the English sparrow, that it has, upon the whole, and within the limits provided by law, manfully resisted the transplantation and general propagation of the household pun. I do not believe there is any American of literary sensibility who will not be pained or touched with a sympathetic embarrassment to find one of these hard, shallow bumps in the fluid texture of that most wonderful passage of Charles Lamb "On Burial Societies; and the Character of an Undertaker."

To provide ourselves a bier, he tells us, we curtail ourselves of *beer*.

It fills the whole form and definition of a joke. There is a meaninglessness in one way of taking the word he has italicized, a meaningfulness in the other —a nothing and a something, a disappointment and a satisfaction. But there is no grace of absurdity borne onward by a wave of delight, because the event

has not happened in the sphere of our actual enterprise, which was not a perceiving of words but a conceiving of ideas. We are made aware that a joke has been perpetrated, but denied the pleasure of its intimate experience. We have something to forgive as traducing, rather than to enjoy as disappointing our expectation. And for this act of clemency we ask a fair consideration. We demand that a pun shall do something more upon the affirmative side than merely make a little sense. Only when that demand is handsomely met do we admit a pun among the most illustrious of those "darlings of absurdity" to be described as practical jokes.

CHAPTER X

POETIC HUMOR

People who feel affectionate toward daffodils call them daffodillies, and I suppose that people who feel the same way toward crocodiles call them crocodillies, although I have never met any such people. I will assume that the reader at least has no such deep attachment in this direction as would blind him to a certain inappropriateness combined with the appropriateness of the word. It is a feeling word that does not fit. And that is a thing most obviously to be described as poetic humor. For poetry always speaks in words that feel. It speaks in words that cherish the qualities of things, and bring them forth shiningly into the mind. Poetry is the art of calling names, and poetic humor is a playful disconcertion of this art. To call whiskey "fire-water" is poetic; and to call Apollinaris "this water that tastes like your foot's asleep" is poetic also, but with a tincture of the impossible that makes it humorous.

Aside from the hypnotic assistance of rhythm, there are two methods by which poetic language makes vivid our realization of things. It *chooses* some salient detail or flavor in those things upon which we may focus our attention; and it *compares* those things with others which are similar in some salient detail or flavor.

In poetic humor we can distinguish these same two arts—an art of inappropriate choice and an art of incongruous comparison.

When Dante describes a saint who has come down from heaven as "One who left off singing hallelujahs," he is naming his object by means of the salient detail. And when O. Henry speaks of a metropolitan character as "One at whose bidding many lobsters had perished," he is doing the same thing. The poetry of the first expression lies in the appropriateness of the detail spoken to array round itself as a centre all the other qualities of the thing it names. The humor of the second lies in a certain objective possibility of its doing that, combined with an emotional impossibility. We feel that a human being can hardly be designated by so accidental an attribute, or that if he can, then the designation ought not to be applied with so much rhetorical dignity. It is a playfully inappropriate choice.

When Burns tells us that

> "Like winds in summer sighing,
> Her voice is low and sweet,"

we are moved by the congruity of these two things to realize them both the more perfectly. But when Aristophanes tells us that an eminent statesman "has a voice like a pig on fire," we receive into our consciousness two emotional atmospheres so negative to each other that they fall apart with an explosion. It is a playfully incongruous comparison.

These two simple acts of choice and comparison underlie and explain all the forms of poetic language which grammarians call "figures of speech"—synecdoche, metonymy, metaphor, simile, all those incomprehensible terrors of the classroom. And just as the language of Shakespeare is packed full of these poetic figures in the intense, bold, delicate, wanton extremity of their perfection, so the language of Rabelais is packed full of them in a state of contortion, magnification, syncope, insanity, sudden collapse, and general discombobulation, injury and disability of existence, that is among the supreme wonders of literature. The humorous names of Rabelais and the poetic names of Shakespeare—these two things come nearest in natural miracle to the invention of language itself.

Of course it is not only names but also things that are poetically humorous. In actual life as well as in imagination we attempt to realize the being of things, and find ourselves balked by some rift or inhospitality in their structure. Either they contain too much of the ugly, the dreadful, the disgusting, for us to realize with serious enjoyment, or else they contain elements so contradictory according to the judgment of our habits, that they will not "run together" in perception—they are *incongruous*. And this external disaster, being playfully accepted, gives rise to the same warm laughter, many-colored and tinctured with all the varieties of emotion and sensation, as the language of the humorous poet.

Indeed there is no better way to portray the gradual

and yet great difference between practical and poetic humor than by recalling the development of that quaint figure of pity-comedy created by Charlie Chaplin in the moving pictures. He began his career under the rod of the commercial manager as an amazingly agile and original clown, a little big-footed, semi-mechanical manikin with a gift for blundering when we expected him to succeed, and succeeding when we expected him to fail. His enterprising misadventures followed each other with the rapidity of bullets fired out of a machine-gun, keeping us in a state of narrative suspense too strenuous and perpetual for any poetic drinking in of qualities in scene and character. We carried home only the general memory of a violent state of busyness, a little man forever in a new hurry, stumbling on every pebble of his tread, and yet continually arriving too, and winding up in a pure whirlwind of action and reaction with some great joyful or disastrous bang at the end. We might say that the concrete material of those pictures, the people, scene, and situation, served only the purpose of arousing a sufficient interest in the question what was to be done.

But a poet was acting in them, and after the authority of a manager and the commercial pressure were removed, he began to give rein to his native interest in those materials for their own sake. He allowed the presence of qualities as well as the accomplishment of deeds to occupy time. He filled his pictures full of rich and moving incongruities of mood and character and situation, amid which he himself, without chang-

ing the quaint garb of the buffoon days, began to acquire a quality of soft and curious pathos. A bewildered wistful genius in low circumstance, he is, moving with all our pity and delight through a series of experiences wrought together with exquisite sense for the ludicrous, the droll, the confluence of incompatible emotions. The "gags" no longer consist only of new ways to fall down and find something; they consist of new kinds of inappropriateness in attitude and gesture and expression. Indeed a gift for acting as though a present thing were something else, and acting so vividly that the absent thing flashes actually before us too, is almost the essential principle in Charlie Chaplin's art. He is not a "funny man." He is not even exactly a comedian. He is a humorous poet who happens also to be a great actor—a master of mimetic gesture and expression. It is this union of two perfect gifts that has enabled him, without ever speaking a word, to arrive at a place of renown in the world's adoration that might be envied by Santa Claus.

What could be more inherently laughable, for instance, supposing it is enacted with the perfect realism of the barnyard, than the picture of an angel picking its feathers? It combines in a single perception two groups of associated ideas and feelings so lively and yet so incompatible, and it combines them with such irresistible plausibility, that we can neither deny it nor receive it into the existing habits of our mind. We must either humorously laugh, or give up the hope

of remaining alive in this perception. And that is the characteristic of all truly poetic humor.

Those who think that laughter is composed of scorn are accustomed to describe these incongruities as examples of the "degradation" of a felt value. They will say here that the reminiscence of a hen-house brings a kind of disgrace or defilement of honor to an angel, and that our laughter is a gleeful exultation at his fall. But they could find in these same comedies, if they chose to, examples in which the intruding reminiscence is on a perfect par of honor with the actual scene—as when a stack of pancakes is counted and divided like a roll of bills. And they could find examples in which the reminiscence is incongruous because it gives too much honor to the present object—as when the actor lifts his hat deferentially to a cow upon seizing her teats, as though offering a somewhat dubious courtesy to a lady. It is true that humor depends upon playfulness and implies it, and for that reason the intrusion of something too intensely solemn or devout cannot be humorously perceived, no matter what it may intrude upon. Both ends of a simile that is humorous must be lightly taken. But beyond that there need be no downward tendency. There need be no tendency at all, no choice implied, no judgment rendered. And for the most there is none in these pictures. It is just the perpetual streaming out of quaint, odd, grotesque, jolly-foolish, droll, and fantastic mixtures of the qualities of experience that gives them so poetic a popularity. The incidents most laughed at have no

value but the pleasure of that laugh. They stand in the same relation to poetic jokes that absurdity does to practical jokes. And the comic emotion they create, although more lingering and vari-colored, and capable of being objectified, so that it seems a quality in the things instead of an element in our perception, is still the pure feeling of playful pain. It is the unmixed and original action of our sense of humor.

Humor of this kind does acquire a point, however, and may be suitably described as a "joke" when the disappointment of our poetic or idle impulse to perceive, is so managed as to bring either a meaning to our minds or a satisfaction to some underlying current of choice between the two things offered to our attention. It is this underlying current, for example, that gives durability to the memory of that little old lady who went to church one Sunday morning, stepping quietly and soberly down the aisle, leaned over an elderly gentleman in one of the front rows, and asked him in a loud whisper: "Is this pie occupewed?" Few apparently pointless jokes have survived so long and travelled so far in the conversational lore of a people as that one has in the United States. Anywhere else in the world it might have been recalled once or twice, I should imagine, and then forgotten. But to us who were so early compelled to go to church, and to go to a very Protestant church where a solemn behavior was required of us in absence of the sensuous conditions of solemn feeling, to us the relief of tension involved here seems to have been so great as to con-

stitute a positive joy, and we preserve this blunt joke as carefully as though it had a point.

An immense variety of laughable anecdotes can be remembered, however, of which this little old lady's misadventure is typical—amazing and fine things that have happened in the midst of prayer, keen remarks that little children have made about God, shoving up of little buds of reality through the vain show of weddings, christenings, patriotic celebrations, Sunday-school lessons, prayer-meetings, burial excursions, visits of the bishop. Rabelais carried these jokes to the extreme to which all good things ought to go in the twenty-second chapter of his book "Pantagruel," in which a pious lady attends to her prayers, and what befalls her is so contrary to the expected blessings of God upon the devout, that I leave it to the reader to find out for himself at a time when his curiosity somewhat exceeds his piety and refinement.

There is in the breast of every one of us a little child who has never absolutely accepted these adult solemnities, or agreed upon their awful and transcendent value, and it is the pleasure of the unchaining of this child that flows in upon the body of our surprise, and makes a complete joke out of what would otherwise be but a ludicrous interruption. We receive a satisfaction that is really more exalted than the fulfilment of our pious intention, and better for our health too. It is the satisfaction of feeling free. And humorous liberty is so definite and delightful a quality of feeling that it too has been made the basis of a

definition of humor, and all laughter has been explained as a kind of declaration of independence upon the part of the nervous system. But "liberty" is only another way of describing the things of which we are perpetually deprived. And any of these things may be relied upon to reinforce our laughter at a poetic incongruity, as well as at a practical disappointment. They all seem to combine together indeed—liberty, and hostility, and truth, and even a sexual interest adheres to them—in the case of the man who was compelled to ride to his wife's funeral in the same carriage with his mother-in-law, and all protests and evasions having ultimately failed, he leaned over the wheel and growled at the funeral director: "Well, you've spoiled the day for me, that's all!" It is the perfect ineptness of that form of words to the flavor of the occasion, that makes so humorous its aptness for the expression of certain eternal if not very tactful underpropensities of the broken heart.

Of all the values that may loom up in the midst of a poetic ineptitude, the most charmingly surprising is poetic truth from some other point of view. For it happens that the external world is so indeterminate, or so patient of our whims, that it is quite willing to *be* a great many different things according as we choose to perceive it. It is only a question of the posture of our eyes and feelings, for example, whether Turner's famous painting in the Boston Museum is properly to be described as a picture of "The Slave-Ship," or of "A tortoise-shell cat having a fit in a platter of toma-

toes." There is the action of the poet in both names. And this is true, not only of oil-paintings, but also of the most interesting creations of nature. We might be watching with a child's romantic admiration a parade of nature's wonders through the village street, and some more realistic friend might whisper that an elephant walks as though his pants were coming down. And although that ludicrously disturbs our own poetry of elephants, we see that it is accurate, and in the second ripple of our laughter we become the poets of its truth. To be able to perceive the world in many different ways, and in each receive it with the poet's love of all experience, is perhaps a danger in the moral fibre, but it is a gift that adds deep joys of color to our humorous laughter. It is the gift of those who have a quick imaginative sympathy, and it makes them seem to be laughing a little all the time when they are not in tears, for they are seeing life's incidents continually with the eyes of others while they see them with their own.

It is clear, then, that poetic jokes do not differ from practical ones in the variety and high potency of their points. They differ in their more enduring ability to provoke laughter without a point. A mere incongruity, like the picture conveyed in these lines,

> "So very deaf was my grandfather Squeers,
> That he had to wear lightning-rods over his ears,
> To hear even thunder, and oftentimes then
> He was forced to request it to thunder again,"

will tickle us into laughter more strongly and more often than a mere bull, or vacancy of meaning, because it presents to us an actual thing and not just the absence of it. And for that reason the poetic humorist, when great and significant incongruities fail him, is less at a loss than the practical wit. He can fall back upon the crude flow of materials, and pass the time in mere horse-play or general tomfoolery, relying upon the fact that to an aroused imagination a little tinged with the relics of previous hilarity, the very presentation of existence, the queer combinations of attributes which hobble upon the stage of reality and make their lame attempt to be things, is enough to beget humorous laughter.

Especially in America our habits seem to be tolerant toward this form of relaxation. I remember a time when the Mayor of New York told some young ladies graduating from a seminary that the proper way to fix an egg so that a man can eat it, is to put it in boiling water and boil it for four minutes; and this little article of faith fell under the eye of the "funny man" employed by the New York *World*, who for two weeks thereafter filled a column and a half a day with all manner of theses, dissertations, arguments, sermons, exhortations, epistolary disquisitions, field reports, laboratory findings, diagrams, maps, pictures, and statistics, to the amusement of a whole city. It was not because he had anything very witty to say about boiling eggs, but because he had the poetic sense to perceive that the intrinsic qualities of an egg—its history,

its connections, its possible career, its non-committal expression combined with a liability to blossom suddenly—offer a wealth of immediate material to the faculty of humorous perception. One of the letters he received put up a vain pretense that eggs are not humorous.

"Egg Editor,

"The New York World: [it ran]

"Dear Sir:

"I want to express my sympathy with you in your unsuccessful effort to extract humor from an egg. I don't blame you. Ever since we moved out on the farm I've been trying to find out what there is about an egg to cackle over. I think the truth is that an egg looks funny, but really isn't. Of course all this talk about hard-boiled eggs is pure nonsense. It doesn't matter how hard you boil an egg, the question is how long. When you get right down to common sense, there is no such thing as a boiled egg. You can't boil an egg. An egg hardens below the boiling point. All you can do is to boil the water around it, and you can do that just as well before, or after, or without putting the egg in at all."

If there is any ground for the opinion that the Americans have "a different sense of humor" from the British, it is a difference in the direction of their tolerance. The British are more interested in intellectual life than we are, and that interest renders them tolerant toward

intellectual silliness. But they have also an ideal of emotional restraint, a cult of hypocritical coolness, that makes them frown down upon any mere ludicrous uproar as somewhat provincial, frowning through an eye-glass which itself looks so funny to us we can hardly hold in until we get back to New York. In New York all kinds of loose and inebriate foolishness is accepted, but those puns and little lingual and cerebral jigs and jocules so dear to the cultivated British, are greeted by us with the symptoms of serious pain.

It was in America, I think, that the poetic "humorist" as a professional character was first baptized with that name. He is not a satirist, nor a clown, nor a comedian, nor in any sense a resurrected court fool or jester. He has not enough wit or agility for that. He is a man of naturally droll mind and rather uncouth magnetism, who simply stands up and talks. He makes everything he talks about seem funny without cracking jokes about it. It seems funny because he is funny. He is inappropriate. Everything he does or has to do with is inappropriate. The harlequin dresses himself up in order to make people laugh, but the humorist, knowing that all mankind is dressed up, achieves the same end by coming out in his own clothes. If there is any point in his humor, it is a kind of lovable honesty which underlies all that inappropriateness—not a profound honesty, perhaps, but honest provincialism in a society much overstraining the effort to escape it. Artemus Ward was one of the

founders of this tradition, which achieved a great height of art and personality in Mark Twain, whose innocence was aggressive, and his provincialism one of the gayest, great oaken broadswords with which the idols and elegances of the centres of culture were ever wantonly assailed.

CHAPTER XI

GOOD AND BAD JOKES

THE day may come when some insuppressible classificator, a kind of scholastic joculary entomologist, equipped with an eyepiece and a bottle of chloroform, will go about collecting all the different kinds of jokes and puns and whims and twits and follies, and all the nameless little light-winged forms of "smile talk" that the ingenious hand of evolution may unfold, pin them down in a great book with names derived from the all-suffering Latin, one each for the genus, species, family, order, tribe to which they severally belong, and so endow the mighty steel-ribbed shelves of the libraries of this world with a new and monumental science. It will be a science upon which those who are addicted to labor can practise their vice without fear of ever exhausting the material. For here we have already, with our distinction between simple humor and jokes with a point, and between the two currents of value, positive and negative, which constitute the point of a joke, and between poetic and practical, quantitative and qualitative humor—we have already laid ground for enough permutations and combinations to fill with their illustration many laborious volumes. And we have not even mentioned the well-known distinction between dry humor and

wet, or between salt wit and sweet, or made half the trouble that might be made out of that between comic action and the humor that is conveyed in words. Undoubtedly a deep and stupendous task is here already in outline. And there remains the fact that when we are once inwardly frivolized, and rendered a little inanely hysterical, as we certainly shall be before we have finished perusing one of these vast works, we will laugh at anything at all that is mentioned—and so in the end the learned professor will find himself compelled to classify all things that are, and he will have to kill and chloroform the whole universe and pin down the very wings of time, in order to complete his science and be sure that everything laughable is ordered and understood as it should be.

It is not my purpose even to make a beginning of this exalted work in the present chapter. I shall merely venture to designate one little minor difference which that ultimate compilation will no doubt very justly ignore—the difference between good jokes and bad. Whether it is a sheer lack of moral enthusiasm, or an inability to plumb the thing to its depths, the fact is that no one who has ever written upon this subject has offered any rule or precept by which we might, without risking some terrible public disgrace and exposure, choose in advance between the good and the bad. No technique has ever been established, no lessons given, no schools founded, no text-books, no lectureships, no missionaries sent among the infantile and the depraved, to explain how to avoid the pale

fizzle and bring on the jovial cheer. It has all been left to chance and divine empirical guesswork. And yet it is quite possible, I believe, to diagnose the infirmities of jokes that are bad, and tell what are the fine points of a joke that is good. And by concentrating the attention of certain bright wits and village cut-ups upon the extreme delicacy of these latter points, it might even lie within the scope of mortality to reduce the number of their delinquencies and the incredible glibness with which they commit them. I will, therefore, lay down the first eight laws of a code for serious joke-makers.

Law Number One

There must be a real engagement of the interest of the person who is expected to laugh.

This would seem obvious enough, were it not that so many of those serious persons who have elected themselves philosophers of the comic have been under the impression that laughter is a purely intellectual product. Seeing that humor is playful and has little to do with their own industrious feelings, they have jumped to the conclusion that it is "logical" or "cerebral," and has nothing to do with the feelings at all. But as we have observed that play is an instinctive condition, and that humor itself is a feeling, nothing appears more certain than that jokes cannot strongly affect us unless our voluntary nature is alert. We must be interested, both in the direction of the disap-

pointment and in that of the satisfaction, in order to receive the full flavor of a comic experience.

If this fact were fully appreciated and made the subject of public instruction, it might serve to defend us against the infliction not only of *dull jokes* but also of what may be called *perfunctory jokes*, the product of a mere habit of shallow-headed caprice, or "kidding"—both words are derived from the goat—and it might also reduce the torture we suffer from the perpetual conversational play-acting, grandiose or petiose mummery, baby-talk buffoonery, and general clowning around of unmagnetic people. It is only necessary for a person who is considered wise to act foolish in order to give us a kind of jocular surprise, for we experience at the same moment a shock and the pleasure of a moral relaxation. But very often the person who decides to act foolish is mistaken in thinking that this will be a surprise, and out of that fact arises much awkward boredom and the artificial laughter which may truly be called intellectual. These inveterate conversational gay-boys and professional pickle-herrings should be advised to make sure that the company is fond of them before they carry too far, just as jokers must be sure that their matter is interesting, and not trust the mere form of comicality to produce laughter. Humor must be alive—that is the first law of the laughter-making art.

An intuitive effort to conform to this law is the trick of imputing one's jokes to prominent or popular personalities, and especially to great humorists. Mark Twain

would appear, since Lincoln passed into history, to be the author of most of the comic things that have ever been said in the United States. And this is merely because the imagination of his genial person and authority colors a joke and tunes it up to a better explosion, thickening the mixture a little, as he might have said. A trick that is similar in purpose, although opposite in fact, is to attribute every humorous thing one relates to his own past history, giving it thus the warmth of his visible personality and winning a tolerance toward its frailties that might otherwise be lacking. This method must be employed with a certain courage and preparedness, however, for when some one in the audience who is not merciful says, "Yes, I heard that story up in Montreal," there must be no weakening. We must reply firmly, "No doubt you did," and add in a slightly wearied manner, "it was widely commented on at the time."

The importance of this emotional interest in the material of humor is revealed in the adjective with which we describe our favorite examples. We call them *rich*. And for perfectly scientific purposes a rich joke may be defined as a poetic-practical joke in which the interest balked and the one satisfied are both strong. Jokes about mothers-in-law are not often rich, because upon this topic our interests flow strongly and continually in only one direction. But upon the topic of marriage itself almost all jokes are rich, for we are every one of us both for it and against it. There are few at least whose hearts in love have

never inclined toward this authoritative ceremony and condition of legal beatitude, deceiving themselves that in its consummation they will find that Absolute which is the goal of all strong emotion; and few who do not hold in their breast the germs of outrageous rebellion against its artificial and imposing bonds. For this reason matrimony is of all human things the most filled full and spouting at the corners with humorous laughter. It is only necessary to say something like this, "Well, there's one thing about Sam, he's a king in his own household," and hire some one to answer, "Yes, I was there the day she crowned him with a pot of beans," in order to secure a position of permanent affluence upon the American vaudeville stage.

In Puritan countries we have a similarly divided attitude toward profanity—a mixture of hereditary love and acquired disapproval—which makes it possible to enliven the dullest tale by dropping in some appropriate but inappropriate swear-word. And alongside of matrimony and swear-words I think we might place doctors, as a topic upon which our feelings are mixed in this way that is so fertile of hilarity. Healers and bringers of balm in our days of pain, in our prosperous days they are always coming in and convicting us of unheard-of diseases, and they take a deliberate pleasure in removing our appendixes, our tonsils, our pituitary bodies, our various ducts, glands, and tissues, including our pocketbooks, and other organs which we have erroneously considered indispensable.

A man subject to epileptic seizures was picked up unconscious on the streets of New York and rushed to a hospital, and when they took off his coat one of the nurses found a piece of paper pinned to the lining, upon which was written: "To inform the house surgeon that this is just a case of plain fit—not appendicitis. My appendix has already been removed twice." Nothing more impetuous than this rush to the doctor—the picture of expectancy—nothing more out of that picture than to find the mute cause of it warding off any further disaster with a diagnosis prepared in advance! And when that mute's contribution is apparently complete, and the remark merely thrown in that his appendix has been removed, a remark of which we expect little but the conclusion, and this impossible word *twice* hits us, disappointing our minds again, but releasing in our hearts a whole secondary flood of antidoctorial glee, joy, and glory, the cup is indeed running over. That is the kind of joke that doubly deserves to be called rich, the joke with a *reinforced point.* And with that we may take it as settled that a good joke requires at least two strongly flowing currents of interest in the person who is expected to laugh.

Law Number Two

The feelings aroused in the person who is expected to laugh must not be too strong and deep.

As our first law flowed from the fact that the sense of humor is an instinct, this law flows from the fact

that it is a play instinct. There are certain things about which certain people care too firmly and passionately to contemplate them, or even to perceive them, playfully. There are pains and disappointments too great, even when they are imaginary, for any interior machinery of light-heartedness to turn them into comic enjoyment. They run too deep to gear in with that machinery. And on the other hand, there are satisfactions too solemn and noble in their rhythm of joy to reinforce the short ripple of a comic laugh. In both directions there must be moderation, in both a sense of the bounds of the heart's possibilities, if we are to avoid the peculiar disaster of the *inept* or *untimely joke*, the joke that is *malapropos*.

How peculiar a disaster it is! How much more sickening to the beholder—and to the perpetrator, if perchance he is not the shallow barbarian he appears—than a misplaced image of poetry, a misplaced pity, or pride, or ventilation of anger! When a joke is not a joke, it is too often a tragedy. And this is because humor brings with it an implication as to our total attitude to life. It does not merely add an emotional color, but alters the general tone. The question is not only whether we shall *feel humorous*, but whether we shall *be playful*, at that particular moment—a more entailing question. We recognize this in the exquisite admiration we give to those who have jested in seasons of great personal danger. When Sir Thomas More set foot upon the scaffold it shook a little, you remember, and he said to the executioner who offered him a

hand: "Help me to ascend—I will shift for myself coming down." The unfitness, and yet again the terrible fitness, of this so common form of words in that uncommon circumstance is what makes it humorous; but what makes it dearer than any jest is the strong audacity of the man's heart who could say it. Courage is required to take life playfully, and we are assured of this when we see one of these men of courage take death with the same genius. Rabelais punned with his last breath upon the name of the Lord, and Heine too had his smile at the business of being almighty. These celebrated jests are significant, not only as examples of the power of humor on the lips of those who are in a position to command our feelings, but also as warnings to those who are not. We cannot jest on any death-bed but our own, and there is a general incompatibility between humor and the deep experience of passion, which only those understanding it can ever dare to ignore.

Of the jokes which are bad because they are inconsiderate of this simple fact, the commonest and most definitely charactered are the hostile joke that is *carried too far,* and the sexual joke that we call *obscene.* I suppose the reason why an obscene joke has so blasphemous a flavor to those who enjoy the religion of love is that their reverence for love upon the physical side was arrived at only after overcoming a childish identification of sexual things with things that are disgusting. It is a reversion to this attitude that they fear when people begin to speak humorously

about the physical aspects of sex. They fear that these people, besides inviting them to be playful about a subject charged for them with the most poignant emotions—an invitation which they might or might not choose to accept—are also inviting them to treat this subject as a mere example of the playfully ugly, a crude form of poetic humor at its best, and in this case contradictory to the essence of their perceptions. Their distaste for such humor is poetic and fully justified by the Freudian explanation of its character, and it is difficult to understand why so many of the apostles of the Freudian cult should regard a general insensibility to this distinction as a sign of their liberation. It is a sign of dulled nerves and a weak sense of the qualities of experience.

Words do not merely name things, but they indicate an attitude toward them, and the words which indicate toward matters of sexual passion an attitude of infantile contempt are very sharply distinguished from other words, and they will naturally be avoided by those whose poetic purpose is not to generate such an attitude. A peculiar difficulty arises, however, when poets wish to speak sensuously about sex. They may desire to speak with all directness, but they are compelled to adopt allusions and circumlocutions, because no simple poetic names exist for the things they would speak of. There is no language of physical love between that of anatomical science and that of obscene ridicule—an evidence that the race of man has never really lived. I can imagine that some day a very great

poet, or poetic age of freedom, will fill up those strained silences in our vocabulary with names for the lips of lovers and of those who sing. It would require a poet of no more adventurous determination than Walt Whitman, nor more sheer creativeness in language than Rabelais. For Walt Whitman at least avowed the impulse toward such utterance, and Rabelais did fill those silences with pages of the most living names ever created by the tuneful imagination of a poet—only they were always humorous as well as poetic, and so hostile to the full experience of any passion. For neither in the way it is to fail, nor in the way it is to satisfy, can a thing be humorous and touch us to the depths.

Law Number Three

Both the negative and the positive current of feeling must be simply and naturally induced.

There must be no appearance of effort either in building up an interest to be disappointed or in planting the seed of satisfaction in that disappointment. A joke above all created things must not seem *artificial.* It must not seem *manufactured, dragged in, far-fetched,* or as the Romans used to say it, *brought from home.* It must appear just to have risen up, with as light a springing as a wild bird out of the natural pathway. In all the forms of art a *labored* thing is usually condemned as bad, but in the art of humor it may be condemned as nothing at all. For

humor is an inseparate property of play, and dies like the light in the eyes of a romping child at the first hint of an undertaking.

It was this supreme sin of hard labor that Mark Twain committed in that famous speech of his before the literary divinities of New England—a speech which according to his own account fell into as chilly and bottomless a silence as ever greeted the earnest interruptions of an idiot. To try to make a humorous speech and fail, is the nearest that any man in the full possession of his faculties can come to the fine agonies of nightmare; and we cannot but shudder in sympathy when we think of this young ambitious celebrity coming out of the West only to ruin himself in that long ghastly disaster. But it is also painful to feel obliged to try to laugh for the reason that some one with great sweat and effort is trying to make you; and that is what Mark Twain was doing. His speech, which he saw fit to publish and defend many years later, is the most evidently labored over, thought out, built up, joined together, reared, educated, travelled with, and conscientiously perpetrated, of any document in the sad history of comic attempts. I can imagine that those Bostonian moonshees whose inability to laugh he imputes to their dignity and hypersensitiveness, were really in almost as much pain as he was, and devoutly prayed to their gentle gods that he would say something spontaneously playful before he sat down.

Mark Twain was in his intellectual and poetic gifts,

and in the native predominance of this instinct, one of the great humorists of the world. And the world was aware of that. But no book remains that is exuberant enough to prove it. They are all blemished —even his narrative masterpiece, "Huckleberry Finn," is blemished—with long passages of uncontagious humor. And I believe the reason is that Mark Twain himself regarded his writing, and especially his humorous writing, as work rather than play. It was money-making, and not merry-making, that got possession of the soul of this man. He was indolent, but his indolence was not regal enough to disdain the religion of respectability that hung over him. He could never heartily have cried with Rabelais: "The fragrant odor of the wine, oh, how much more dainty, pleasant, laughing, celestial, and delicious it is, than that smell of oil! And I will glory as much when it is said of me that I spent more on wine than oil, as Demosthenes did when it was told him that he spent more on oil than wine. I truly hold it for an honor and praise to be called and reputed a Merry Andrew and a Robin Goodfellow. . . . For this cause interpret you all my deeds and sayings in the perfectest sense; reverence the cheese-like brain that feeds you with these fair billevezees and trifling jollities, and do what lies in you to keep me always merry. Be frolic now, my lads, cheer up your hearts and joyfully read. . . ."

That is a manifesto to which even the most kempt and demeanored of wits may well pay attention. For whatever be the pain of its parturition, you must

never let fall upon the delivery of your joke the shadow of the apparition of hard labor. That is an immutable law of the laughter-making art.

Law Number Four

The identity of the positive current with the negative must be immediate and perfect.

The satisfaction must *be,* or be *of,* or be *in,* the disappointment. There must be no mediation or bridging, no argument necessary here. This is, of course, a supreme law for all jokes with a point, flowing directly from our definition of the nature of a point—or, for that matter, from Euclid's definition. For a point, according to Euclid, is "that which has position without dimension," and this is only a more cumbersome way of saying that "brevity is the soul of wit." The soul of wit is more than brief, it is instantaneous. No matter how vast and extensive the surroundings nor how elaborate the building up of the approach—the batteries arranged, the wires laid and connected—all that may be accomplished with leisure if the humorist has poetic or narrative power, but the current must flash when the time comes. If it does not flash, it is not there. You cannot explain a joke. You cannot nurse, cherish, medicate, exercise, or encourage a joke that is *lame.* The more you sympathize with it, the lamer it gets, your efforts and explanations only adding themselves to what already stood between the two elements required to be identical at the first go. Try,

for example, to insert into the experience of an Englishman, unfamiliar with the sacramental dialects of our great American devotions, baseball and Christian Science, the humorous flavor of that head-line reporting the death of Mary Baker Eddy: "She stole home on an error." You will realize that nothing in this world is more remote from the causes of humorous laughter than the perfect comprehension of an *explained joke.*

A milder infliction, and yet one against which this law should also protect us, is the joke which, while obvious enough in its intention, is in its actuality *forced.* It is a joke which we have to explain to ourselves, bringing its two currents together by some act of inference or allowance, instead of finding them perfectly united upon a point. A forced joke whose imperfection is visible to the eye as well as the mind is that one in Shakespeare's "Much Ado About Nothing" where Messina tries to sing the praise of Benedick, while Beatrice runs him down:

Mess. And a good soldier, too, lady.
Beat. And a good soldier to a lady: but what is he to lord?

A splendid Shakespearian line in its utterance of what she means, but in the absence of any identity between that and what she does *not* mean, a very imperfect joke. "Too" is not the same thing as "to a," and only with an expenditure of force can they be compressed together into a point.

The same imperfection, although invisible to the eye, appears in the response of the clown in "Hamlet"

when he was asked "upon what ground" the prince went mad.

"Why, here in Denmark," he said.

In order to be a passable joke, these words would have to answer the question "where?" in the same instant that they fail to answer the question "why?" But this does not happen, because the phrase "upon what ground" is not really a natural way of asking the question "where?" We have to pretend that it is, and that act of pretense divides by a hair's breadth the two things which should be one.

It may be that this phrase had a different trend of meaning in Shakespeare's time, and, if so, then we have illustrated the fact that jokes which we translate, or even transport over long ages, have often to be *forced* when they arrive among us. This joke appears to me, however, not only forced, but also *labored*—for those words, "Upon what ground," are not even a simple way of asking the question "why?" They were falsely imputed to the questioner for the very purpose of the clown's answer. The joke was *built up to*, in short, with artificial dialogue, as Shakespeare's jokes too often are, requiring the antics of a naturally ludicrous actor to get any laughter out of them. And since it is a *dull* and *perfunctory* joke besides, and not worth any labor even if labor were a virtue, I think we may set it down as a little model of bad jokes—a thing of vices all compact.

Shakespeare had a true gift of poetic humor; his characters, his situations, his epithets, are often in-

trinsically laughable. And, moreover, in his painting of Falstaff he deliberately flouted the narrow satirical conception of humor common to the Aristotelian critics of his time. He demanded that we laugh with Falstaff and not only at him. "The brain of this foolish compounded clay, man," says Sir John, "is not able to invent anything that tends to laughter, more than I invent or is invented on me: I am not only witty in myself, but the cause that wit is in other men." For the heroic measure of that boast, as well as for the degree of its poetic achievement, we must give some honor to the humor of Shakespeare. But in the matter of forcing, laboring, far-fetching, explaining, and generally miscreating and mismanaging practical jokes, he has hardly his equal among the great. Shakespeare is the supreme poet, and he was one of the few universal intelligences of history, but also, in some measure all through his life, he was a man with a peculiar little hobby. He was a collector of words, and all sorts of odd and minutely surprising word-relations. Perhaps in this he merely followed the fashion of his time, but often when we expect in Shakespeare a substantial and real passion or opinion, we find only the quaint meticulous enthusiasm of a displayer of these curios. And this which is an occasional blemish in his poetry, is the continual plague of his jokes. Even when they are good jokes, he usually contrives to destroy the current of life in them by turning them upside down, advancing them face backward, dragging them in, dragging them out, picking them apart, or in some other way.

displaying for our inspection what seems to interest him far more than humor does—the queer and curious beings these words are, out of which it can be made.

When jokes are very lively in their emotional material, and provoke us to call them *rich*, they can often dispense with some point of formal perfection; and if they contain ludicrous imagery, a certain lameness of practical formation may even add to their charm. But the purely practical and dispassionate jokes which we call *excellent*, or *very fine*, are always characterized by a surprisingly perfect intricate coincidence of something which they purport to be and are not, with something totally different which they are. A Jewish lawyer who studied in the office of Joseph Choate is said to have made out a bill to his first client for $500, and when Choate quietly picked it up, and added another cipher to the amount, the Jew remarked, "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian." If that remark runs counter to your emotional prepossessions in the matter of jokes between Jews and Christians, you will be the more ready to appreciate the quality which I am describing as formal perfection. For the elaborate exactitude with which those words express a wealth of meaning completely alien to the wealth of meaning they are wont to express, is what makes them memorable. Had it been necessary to vary the quotation by the breadth of a letter, or having reproduced it correctly to ask allowance for the least awkwardness or inadequacy of meaning in the new situation, we should never have preserved this joke as we have in

the humorous lore of the nation. We should have called it *forced*—or seen that it was *lame* upon the one leg or the other. And of this fault, when it is not mitigated by some special warmth or delicacy of poetic flavor, even the most willing laughers are intolerant.

Law Number Five

Practical jokes should not be poetically told, nor poetic jokes practically told.

This simple inference from our definitions would save us, oftener than any other rule we could devise, from the irritating pity of jokes that are *spoiled in the telling*. It is possible, of course, to spoil a joke in all the ways that a joke can be bad—and even in one other way, for occasionally some expert bungler will leave out the point altogether, giving us a full account of the surrounding circumstances with that inexhaustible beaming smile proper to those who have learned their pleasures by heart. Against this accident we need no protection, for these jokers by memory create more laughter than they destroy. A person who fails to see the point is almost always funnier than the point.

But no such compensation occurs when people who have enjoyed a story primarily because of the ludicrous image it evoked in their imagination, repeat it correctly enough in a practical way but without taking the trouble to evoke an image in the imagination; nor when people who have enjoyed something primarily

because of the practical or purely narrative setback which it contained, dilute that value in the rehearsal by spreading an imaginative interest all over the incidental details. In practical jokes our interest should be concentrated upon some forward motion toward a goal either of meaning or achievement. In poetic humor our interest should be awakened in the qualities of a situation.

A lecture-manager in California once telegraphed to Artemus Ward asking him what he would take for forty nights on the Pacific Coast. He telegraphed back: "Brandy and water." That was a manipulation of the intellectual process of meaning, and in retelling it I had no concern but to put the word "lecture-manager" in so prominent a position that the original trend of the question would be clear. Other details, or any lingering upon this one, would detract from the vigor of that trend, and so from the force of its disappointment. What is wanted is a perfectly naked angle of meaning, a blank stoppage in one direction, with instantaneous headway in the other. Poetic language as such does not give us this angularity of meaning, and for that reason poetry is hostile to the clear existence of what we call in the narrow sense "a joke." A joke has to be *sprung*, and while rhyme and a ding-dong metre may chime in, true poetry of speech refuses to assist in so mechanical a process.

To his other faults as a joke-maker, Shakespeare adds this more forgivable one, that he is never quite willing to cease being a poet. He continually tries

to spring practical jokes in the language of the imagination. He does not seem to perceive the difference between that and his true art of luxuriating in the ludicrous—an art which we might well illustrate with a chapter from the misadventures of John Falstaff. In "The Merry Wives of Windsor" he was trapped in his attempted amours by the jealous husband of Mistress Ford, and concealing himself in a basket of soiled clothes, was carried away at her direction and "slighted into the river with as little remorse as they would have drowned a bitch's blind puppies, fifteen i' the litter." Those who remember this tale as Shakespeare tells it, will realize that if it were repeated by some one who merely knew how to convey a piece of practical information, it too could be *spoiled in the telling.*

The distinction between poetic and practical humor, like that between poetic and prosaic language, is of course a relative one. The two kinds of value are commingled in various proportions. But they differ fundamentally, and a sense of their difference is indispensable to those who would make us perfectly happy when we laugh.

Law Number Six

The disappointment involved in a practical joke should be genuine.

This is of course only our technical way of saying that one cannot get the full sting of a joke twice—or even once, if the joke is so badly handled that its out-

come can be anticipated from the beginning. It is a rule that should protect us against *stale jokes*, on the one hand, and against *obvious jokes*, and the terrible disaster of *giving away the point*, on the other. For two reasons the rule is not absolute. In the first place we can be led to adopt an æsthetic attitude toward a good joke, and value it as an object of humorous art without actually passing through the process that made it humorous. Admiration is a happy pleasure, and there are few things that the race of man admires more than a clever joke. In the second place, a certain amount of histrionics is natural to the mood of play, and most of us are able inwardly to simulate an attitude of genuine expectation, even when we know just how it is to be disappointed. We go through the true motions, and get some shadow pleasure even at the fiftieth rehearsal. But the fact remains that, in practical life at least, nothing in the world is quite so stale as a stale joke. We beg for the repetition of a familiar song, but we consider it an act of mercy to stop a man before he tells us one of the stories we have enjoyed before. It is because a disappointment was of the essence of that enjoyment, and a second disappointment in the same premises is impossible. A joke, in order to be a joke, has to be a new one.

And that is what makes family life so trying. It was a custom of the previous generation, and will be, I suppose, of all previous generations, to lay in a stock of "good stories" in early youth, and bring them forth upon festive occasions, reserving the earlier vintages

for the more signal festivities, and the more celebrated guests that might be invited into the family circle. It was a further custom to bring forth these archæological wonders with a certain pomp and circumstance, calling the board to attention, or at least waiting for a lapse of the conversation in which it might be possible to grab its attention, and make formal announcement that a joke was about to be brought on. Having thus destroyed the atmosphere of spontaneous life in which the poor thing might have enjoyed a momentary resuscitation, and having thoroughly diluted the general expectancy by these formal preparations for its disappointment, the master of ceremonies would proceed, in a hush more appropriate to the offering of a word of prayer, to lay out the familiar specifications, draw up the plans, prepare, and gradually but with resolute purpose and fidelity *produce* the venerable wonder before the eyes of all. A great burst of exaggerated laughter would follow, and every one privately seek about among the wreckage of the previous conversation for some good line upon which to get away from the scene of the disaster. But no! The ceremony was not finished. Before this all too perfect burst of hilarity should subside, there was to be at least one, if not indeed two or three, or perhaps four, *repetitions* of the very quintessential point of the thing, so that no mind could escape it, or fail to acknowledge its wonderful spice and durability.

That was a model of the proper way not to appeal to the sense of humor. A person who comprehends

the natural action of this sense will not only never repeat a stale joke if he can help it, nor permit the point of a joke to appear before it has arrived, nor attempt to dwell upon it, or *drag it out*, after it has arrived, but he will even prefer—if his joke is good enough to dispense with the aid of hypnotic suggestion—to keep his auditors unaware up to the very point of explosion that he has any designs whatever upon their centres of risibility. For thus their disappointment will be most pure and genuine, and their satisfaction brightened with a real surprise.

We find accordingly that the more sensitive lovers of humor are loath to sit in at those long sessions of "story-swapping" that corrupt the atmosphere of our club-rooms, and spring up sometimes around our very hearths. There is truth in the dictum of Thomas De Quincey that "Of all the bores whom man in his folly hesitates to hang, and heaven in its mysterious wisdom suffers to propagate their species, the most insufferable is the teller of 'good stories'—a nuisance that should be put down by cudgelling, by submersion in horse-ponds, or any mode of abatement, as summarily as men would combine to suffocate a vampire or a mad-dog." It is not only the peculiar vapidness of an expected disappointment that justifies this noble incitement to riot, but also, I think, the peculiar rigidness which comes over a joke so soon as it is regarded as a thing, a commodity, an object of general exchange. For it then gets over into the category of economic goods, is tainted with a suspicion of "labor

value," and so loses, as we have seen, that playful liquidity which was its bath of origin, and is the only element in which it can vigorously revive and receive breath.

Is there in all the annals of commerce a more pathetic and humorless figure than the man who having made a joke and typewritten it upon a slip of paper, is spending his morning peddling it from one comic editor to another, in hope to secure the price of his breakfast? Is there a more lifeless corpse in creation—a fish more distant from water—than that joke as he pulls it with this serious engagement of interest from his inside pocket? And is there, finally, a person less in a position to enjoy the joke, supposing it should come to life upon his knees, than that industriously "comic" editor? I think the reader will agree that commerce is only a shade less poisonous than manufacture to the play atmosphere in which all jokes take life and motion. And if he will reflect that *barter* is but a primitive and infant kind of commerce, he will begin to see the form in which an indignation against the business of *swapping stories* presents itself to the mind of the true humorist. It is, in brief, a business—or very soon becomes one, a kind of inverse competition setting in, and each bright wit trying to give more for his money than the preceding, until thus gradually creating a state of emulative enterprise, in which none of them is able to give anything of the fresh, idle, and inconsequential bloom of true humor. Humor is a wild thing, quick on its wings. It comes at its best in

the midst of other preoccupations, breaking them and yet belonging among them like the foaming ripple in a clear stream, subsiding again to be again awakened after its flash is forgotten.

Having established these six absolute precepts, as it were from the exterior, we may now pass into the interior of a joke, and lay down two laws as to the proper relation of its parts. The first of these laws is directed against those jokes in which the interest disappointed, while not very passionate, has acquired a fair momentum from the elaborateness of its preparation, or the time through which it has been sustained, and the substituted satisfaction when it comes, seems relatively slight and inconspicuous. The point does not stand up, and the joke is properly described as *flat*. To avoid flat jokes our law of symmetry may be expressed as follows:

Law Number Seven

The interest satisfied must not be too weak in proportion to the interest disappointed.

In order to apply this law with liberality, it is necessary to remind ourselves that a mere disappointment, if properly managed, can be humorous—just as negative electricity, they say, can exist alone—and the droll moment thus arising is not properly to be described as a "joke," nor to be tried or condemned under these laws of symmetry. Every once in a while

a comedian devises a new form of complicated preparation to do something, and succeeds in convulsing his audience, and retiring after half an hour amid shouts of applause, without having done anything at all. That is almost a pure absurdity, and its virtue—aside from those indefinable poetic values of personality and situation—lies in the sincerity and elaborateness of the preparations. The art is to convey a playful humor by seeming hopelessly at work. And the same thing is true about absurdities in speech, the merit of an Irish bull consisting entirely in the nice perfection of its plausibility.

Charles Lamb was very much puzzled by the charm of a certain whimsical no-joke, which he describes in his Essay on the Popular Fallacy that *The Worst Puns are the Best.* "An Oxford scholar," he says, "meeting a porter who was carrying a hare through the streets, accosts him with this extraordinary question: 'Prithee, sir, is that thy own hare, or a wig?'"

Observing the total inability of his mind to find rest in this "most utter and inextricable" absurdity, Charles Lamb sought out points of rest for his imagination. He tried to explain its humor by alluding to the place where it occurred, "a public street not favorable to frivolous investigations," the character of the participants, and other subordinate if contributory details. In short he deceived himself that it was a poetic joke, because as a practical joke he was at a loss to understand what satisfaction it held. The failure of satisfaction itself was the focus of his enjoy-

ment—and not only the failure of serious satisfaction, but the failure of *that failure* to produce a jocular satisfaction, while holding out so plausible a pretense to do so. The reason why "the worst puns are the best"—an aphorism which I believe John Dryden originated—is that they play a joke upon jocularity. And when jocularity is as poor as it is in the whole business of pun-making, we are more than willing to have this joke played.

When I say we are "more than willing," I do of course concede to these puns a positive value as well as a negative. Besides *failing to be good*, they *succeed in being completely bad*, and that brings some balm to the victim. The balm is so slight, however, and the trouble so large, that I think we might take these puns which we are supposed to admire for their criminality as fair examples of the whole genus of *flat jokes*—typical in their structure, and in their flavor characteristic. They do not hand forth a sincere, spontaneous, and unavoidable *nothing* for us to smile at with the original smile of humor; they put up a grinning and egregious pretense to give us also *something else*, and that something else turns out a mere trite act of petty cognizance. They have a point, but its positive action is extremely weak.

To further illustrate this weakness—and to avoid damaging any reputation that is less secure—I take a second example of a flat joke from Aristophanes. He is still describing an argument in Hades as to which is the greater poet, Æschylus or Euripides. Dionysus,

who is the judge, sets up a pair of scales, and orders the two poets to take hold, one upon each side, and recite a line of poetry. Euripides recites the first line of his Medea:

"Would god no Argo e'er had winged the brine!"

Æschylus quotes his Philoctetes:

"Spercheios, and ye haunts of grazing kine!"

The scales descend in favor of Æschylus, and Euripides asks the reason why. Dionysus replies: "He slipped in a river, like a wool-dealer wetting a fleece to make it heavy. You put in a verse with wings."

Before condemning this joke we ought to remind ourselves that judging poetry and weighing wool were both matters of vital interest in Athens. The subject-matter was alive, and we must make some effort of historic imagination even to hear the story as it sounded then. But that effort being made, we become interested. We want a decision on the literary merits of these poets. We have been wanting it in fact through several scenes, and here an extensive apparatus has been collected, and our expectation, while not exactly "strained," may at least be described as well banked and glowing.

We are disappointed. We get no decision on the merits of the poets or their lines of poetry. And what do we get? A reminder that a river weighs more than wings, that wool-dealers cheat their customers, a dig at Æschylus on the basis of that labored simile,

a dig at the business of weighing literature when that business was only rigged up for the very purpose of this joke—a mere job lot of triviality, in short, and that after a long wait and a real disappointment. I think we can say with more confidence than usual in matters of translated humor, that this joke did not have enough strength in the joy end to "get across"—or that if it did, then in the language of Frank Tinney it "just laid there."

Aristophanes himself seems to have been a little nervous about it, for he tried it over again twice with a slight variation, and then fell back hastily upon a gibe at the marital difficulties of Euripides—a "sure fire" in any age or language. Æschylus tells Euripides to get into the scales himself, with all his books, and his wife and children, or as we should say, the whole damn family—including Cephisophon. Well, Cephisophon was not a member of Euripides's family, except as the furtive lover of his wife. And so here the audience received not only a ludicrous suggestion, exaggerating this already fantastic performance to the point of explosion, but also, in the midst of that suggestion a startling *irrelevancy* that was delightfully *relevant.*

The studious reader will see that the centre of gravity—or to be more accurate, the centre of levity—in this joke was well over the base, and there was no possible danger of its *falling flat.* And this condition of stable equilibrium was attained, he will observe, by adding weight to the positive side. It was upon

that side at least that we felt the weakness of what preceded. Our second law of symmetry deals with those jokes in which there is a similar lack of equilibrium, but instead of feeling the weakness of the positive, we feel the excessive strength of the negative. We feel deeply disturbed, and but lightly compensated for the disturbance.

Law Number Eight

The interest disappointed must not be too strong in proportion to the interest satisfied.

To a mechanic it will appear that this law differs from Number Seven only in emphasis; and that is true. But to an artist, who understands that we are concerned with feelings and not with material weights and measures, it will be evident that this law is not only very different, but far more serious than Number Seven. Indeed I venture to predict that when all these Eight Commandments are properly engraved upon tablets of stone and set up in the market-place of some future commonwealth—the relative triviality of our criminal and civil codes being by that time generally understood—it will be this eighth section under which the greatest number of convictions will be secured, and the most summary executions will follow. For its purpose is to protect the free citizen against sudden aggression and violation in any mortal part of the poetry of his life at the hands of the *flippant* joker. And a flippant joker may be defined, in

accordance with its provisions, as one who disrupts any strong trend of action or thought or feeling, without offering in its place a profound, wise, beautiful, or exciting comment, or idea, or vision of life, or even a sincere and contagious contempt of life. He is a light nut whose thoughts have no momentum. His feelings have no depth. He thinks he can skate like a water-bug with the same silly whims over shallow and deep. And when this habit is thoroughly settled upon him, and we observe that everything which comes under his ken is given a turn supposed to interrupt our contemplation of it with some microscopic pleasure, usually the pleasure of admiring his wits, we call such a person *facetious*. Those to whom the death penalty may seem a little extreme even for these chronic offenders—those who never despair of reforming their kind—will find a sentence pronounced against one of them by William Shakespeare, which has a remedial appropriateness not common in courts of less poetic justice. He tells him to "Go and jest a twelve-month in a hospital." There, if anywhere, he will learn the simple truth upon which the law he violates was founded. There are moods and passages in this battle of heartbeats in which, although humor may be possible, it is not easy, and for the playful reception of a gratuitous pain we demand with all right and justice a substantial and a quick reward.

It is not only because we are practical, and wish to be serious in the pursuit of our happy ends, that we make this demand, but also because we are poetic and

desire the privilege of tasting our sorrows. We should not always choose to perceive humorously, even if we could, those pains and sweet losses that belong to us. We have so strong an impulse to experience life that we enjoy suffering. And since the suffering that is caused to us by our own afflictions is too cleaving and shocking to our equilibrium to be always welcome, we turn often to that milder pain which comes to us by sympathy when we behold the misfortunes and the sad expressions of others. We let them bear the organic shock, and also the practical consequences, while we drink off the pure flavor of sorrow. And this experience—still more enjoyable when we know that those others are not now alive, or that the misfortunes which give rise to their expressions are only simulated—this experience we call pathos. Pathos is a name for any arrangement of things, deliberate or accidental, which permits the tender and sympathetic enjoyment of sorrow. And because the occasions which permit this enjoyment, the slight remoteness or moderation of the misfortunes involved, are similar to the occasions which produce humorous pleasure, it is the most difficult of all values to defend against "fresh" or flippant jokers. Pathos is impossible to the flippant; in their very presence its color blanches like the petals of a flower in chlorine gas. Both for the purposes of joy and sorrow, therefore, we resist them.

But the proximity of humor and pathos, although laying us open to these insipid depredations of the Smart Aleck, offers to the humorist whose jokes are

rich and human in their positive values a unique and poignant avenue of art. For his humor is not so far out of key with pathos as to be destroyed by their modulation the one into the other. It is a modulation between serious and playful pain—a thing which seems to enhance, almost as though with a tremor of peril, our enjoyment of them both. I do not know any book in which this experience was ever made more beautiful than it is in "Sentimental Tommy." Tommy ran away, you remember, on that night after the birth of Elspeth—an accident which he had tried so hard but ignominiously failed to prevent. He fell asleep on a distant stair, and woke up in the very early hours of morning, clammy and cold and quaking—"and he was a very little boy, so he ran to his mother.

"Such a shabby dark room it was, but it was home, such a weary worn woman in the bed, but he was her son, and she had been wringing her hands because he was so long in coming, and do you think he hurt her when he pressed his head on her poor breast, and do you think she grudged the heat his cold hands drew from her warm face? He squeezed her with a violence that put more heat into her blood than he took out of it.

"And he was very considerate, too: not a word of reproach in him, though he knew very well what that bundle in the back of the bed was."

Our hearts are quickened by this swift and gentle change, and their smiling laughter shines out both humbled a little and refreshed, like the blossoms in a

meadow after the passage of a shower. And they are quickened in the same way when the shower does not pass at all, but the sun just comes and shines incontinently right in the middle of it. It was so when Tommy after a period of selfish hesitation decided to spend the whole of a God-given shilling to buy his destitute and hungry mother a useful present. "He devoted much thought to what she was most in need of, and at last he bought her a colored picture of Lord Byron swimming the Hellespont."

That was one of those trembling moments—frequent enough in our own lives too—of which we say, "I did not know whether to laugh or cry!" They reveal to us better than any discourse can what humor is, and why it is. And they give also a kind of poem-portrait of its nature. For there is a tincture of pathos, as well as of comedy, in the very existence of this instinct—as a glance in the eyes of any great humorist can tell you. Humor is a most adroit and exquisite device by which our nerves outwit the stings and paltry bitterness of life, but it is after all only a device. It cannot be substituted for life. Like Pagliacci we can only up to a certain point recite our lines in play. The serious purposes of nature throb up into our heads, and we find ourselves living the tragedy to its depth. It is not play. Or if perhaps it is, then the game is too rough for this frail-hearted child of his mother, man, who has strayed into it. His sense of humor is more rich than consolation, but it is not victory.

PART II

THEORIES OF HUMOR

CHAPTER I

THE GREEK PHILOSOPHERS

That there are two general kinds of laughter, and that a complete comic experience contains a union of the two, can almost be inferred from the variety of the attempts men have made to explain laughter and give a single account of its cause. Their explanations divide themselves into three classes—those which seek the cause of laughter in some kind of disappointment, those which seek it in some kind of satisfaction, and those which seek it in a mixture of satisfaction with disappointment.

In the very beginning it was a conversation about pleasures that are mixed with pain which gave rise to the attempt to make a science of comic entertainment.

"You remember," says Plato in the "Philebus," "how at the sight of tragedies the spectators smile through their tears?"

"Certainly, I do."

"And are you aware that even at a comedy the soul experiences a mixed feeling of pain and pleasure?"

The science of humor was born in this peculiar intuition of Plato's. But, though so well born, it did not grow very well in his hands, for Plato quite failed to comprehend the nature of this "mixture" which he

had divined. He said that the pleasure which we experience in laughing at the comic is an enjoyment of other people's misfortunes; the pain is our envy of those people, which makes that enjoyment possible. He would have been in a stronger position if he had said that the pain is our pity of those people, for then he would have made plausible a real mixture of pleasure with pain, instead of merely asserting that the pleasure is one which relieves us of a pain. It is not necessary to envy people in order to enjoy their misfortunes—it is only necessary to be there. And Plato may have become aware of this, for he did not develop the idea that the comic is a mixture of pleasure with pain, but wandered away from it, and seemed content in the end to define the comic simply as a pleasure—the pleasure of seeing other people humiliated, of seeing them appear stupid when they are not powerful or important enough so that their stupidity is a danger to us.

Aristotle borrowed this idea, just as he and the rest of the world have always borrowed ideas, from Plato, and in the fifth chapter of his "Poetics" he defined the occasion of comic laughter as an ugliness that is not harmful.

"Comedy," he said, "is an imitation of characters of a lower type—not, however, in the full sense of the word bad, the ludicrous being merely a subdivision of the ugly. It consists in some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive. To take an obvious example, the comic mask is ugly and distorted, but does not imply pain."

Thus it appears that both Plato and Aristotle identified the laughter of the Greek theatre with scorn. Or, to be more scientific, they conceived laughter as the expression of an emotion compounded of complacence, or "positive self-feeling," with a very slight tincture of disgust or anger. And upon the basis of this conception they were inclined to condemn laughter, and advise the philosophers and wise men of the state not to indulge in it. "Persons of worth," says Plato in the third book of the "Republic," "even if only mortal, must not be represented as overcome by laughter, and still less must such a representation of the gods be allowed." In the "Theatetus," however, where Plato gives his most genial description of the character of the philosopher, he says that under certain circumstances he "cannot help laughing sincerely in the simplicity of his heart." And it is worth remarking that Plato himself indulged in such laughter very often, and that a gentle and all-comprehending profound smile is almost the essence of his philosophy. Indeed, such a master as he of the warmer and more lovable colors of humor could never have grown up among the Athenian Greeks if their laughter had been all egotism and envy.

There was, to be sure, a great license of attack and ridicule on those holidays which the city of Athens devoted to laughter. Aristotle tells us it was the "lampooners" who became writers of comedy when dramatic action began to take the place of the recitation of poems. And lampooners were men of free

tongue in that youthful day. But he also tells us that comedy arose among the makers of phallic verses, and we know that the word *comic* itself in its origin does not mean lampoonery, or satire, or ridicule, or anything else either so scornful or so intellectual as that. It means village revelry or merrymaking, and has relics in its aroma of wine-drinking in the evening, and of ribald song and organized conviviality after the day's work is done. It is more Pantagruellian than sardonic, having about as much scorn in its comprisal as one of those fervent salutations of Rabelais to his disciples—"Most noble and illustrious drinkers, and you thrice precious pockified blades!"

Any one who tries to enter into the humor of Aristophanes will realize how much of this mood still prevailed in his time. His plays are good-natured great farcical exploits of imaginative tomfoolery, which cannot even be enjoyed in the reading, unless one has got into his mind in advance a very copious extra supply of pure mirth. And while pugnacity and pride play a great part in creating the positive values of these exploits, so also do sexuality and sociability, and the love of truth and poetry, and all the other loves of an abounding life. "He is always in the company of Dionysus and Aphrodite," as Plato himself said of him. His characters were Falstaffian rather than Quixotic—they enjoyed the jokes, and frequently went laughing about their own fantastic business. Indeed the very license of their biting gives evidence that the fundamental mood of their creation was not

hostile but hilarious. The Athenians did not throng out upon that sunny hillside to enjoy the misfortunes of others, but to enjoy laughter. And they were as ready to laugh when the comedian turned his ridicule upon them as when he made himself ridiculous for their pleasure. It is still remembered how Socrates got up in his seat to make more comic the caricature of him which Aristophanes was presenting upon the stage, and I believe that incident is typical of the exuberant humor of those best days of the world.

There must have been some opposition even in Plato's mind, to the idea that comic laughter is always derisive. For in the "Symposium" he represents Aristophanes as making a distinction between the word γελοῖος, which is elsewhere Plato's name for the ridiculous, and καταγέλαστος, or as we might say, the laughable and the laugh-downable. And at the end of the "Symposium," when everybody else is drunk or asleep or gone home, and the cocks are beginning to crow, Socrates is still sitting there discoursing, and he is insisting to Aristophanes and Agathon that "the genius of comedy is the same as that of tragedy," to which statement they are compelled to assent because they are "sleepy and do not quite understand his meaning." At so great a distance we can hardly pretend to understand his meaning, either, but we can believe it involved the idea that imaginative sympathy as well as corrective hostility plays its part in the process of comic enjoyment.

In view of these facts, it is not surprising that Aris-

totle's writings, besides containing the derision theory of Plato, should contain also the other great historic theory—that laughter is caused by a disappointment of the person who laughs. In his "Rhetoric," which is a more practical book than the "Poetics," a book devoted to showing people how to talk effectively in the law-courts, Aristotle speaks entirely in the language of this theory. He does what every one else has done who has ever attempted to tell any one *how* to make people laugh—he identifies a joke with a deceived expectation. In illustration he quotes a line of poetry which would be funny in English, too, if we wore sandals and placed our words in the same order that the Greeks do.

"He proceeded, wearing under his feet—chilblains!"

Aristotle might have observed how in this very example he was uniting a disappointment of the reader's temporary expectation with a satisfaction of his chronic hunger for the misfortunes of others. And so he might have combined Plato's definition of the comic with his own definition of a joke, and evolved a theory of humor that would have saved his successors a great deal of trouble. He would have given a real meaning to Plato's assertion that comic experience is a kind of "mixture." And that "the misfortune of others" is not an indispensable part of this mixture would soon have been evident to him—for he did actually describe a joke in which the affirmative value is not misfortune, but a simple *recognition of the truth.*

It was a pun made by Isocrates upon the word ἀρχή, which means both *sovereignty* and *beginning*. Isocrates said that the sovereignty of the Athenians (over the sea and the surrounding peoples) was the beginning of their troubles. And Aristotle observed that we enjoy this joke because "that is stated which we did not expect, and we acknowledge it to be true."

Thus the Greek philosophers were groping toward a real understanding of the complexities of the comic. But they did not labor long enough, and the problem was left at loose ends by them, as it has been by the moderns. There was a satisfaction theory, a disappointment theory, and a vague apprehension of the twofold character of jokes.

CHAPTER II

THE AGNOSTIC ATTITUDE

CICERO was a brilliant mocker, and he said in his dialogue "De Oratore" that it is a part of the orator's business to raise a laugh, because it "lessens, confounds, hampers, frightens, and confutes the opponent." He defined the province of the ridiculous, in accordance with Aristotle's theory, as "a certain meanness and deformity," and he enjoyed most easily, it seems, the jokes that are jokes *on* somebody. I can imagine the sly and urbane masculine relish with which he used to repeat that response of a certain Sicilian to some one who was lamenting because his wife had hanged herself upon a fig-tree. "My dear," he said, "I wish you would give me some slips of that same tree that I may graft them in my garden!"

But Cicero was also a genial friend, and he knew quite well that there are other kinds of humorous laughter than this. He quoted beside it the little remark of Marcus Lepidus, who stretched himself out on the grass with a sigh and said, "I wish this was working!"—a remark which while dismaying our sense of rationality and the potential in the way of wishes, yet gives an extreme pleasure of expression to our own indolence, and makes us admire Lepidus with a pious and companionable love. Thus it was natural that

Cicero should revive also the other opinion of the Greeks, and say that "the most eminent kind of the ridiculous is that in which we expect to hear one thing and another is said."

Cicero was not content, however, to leave these two ideas unrelated to each other, as Aristotle had; he did propose a plan by which they might be reconciled. We always laugh *at* some one, he said, but in the cases where laughter arises from a deceived expectation, "our mistake makes us laugh at ourselves." That is the way in which genial humor is still usually explained by those who insist that all laughter is but a modified contempt; it makes out of the derision theory something that at least pretends to be a complete explanation.

Aside from originating that commodious idea, Cicero added nothing to Aristotle's solution of the problem of the comic, except the valuable opinion that Aristotle did not solve it.

"What a laugh is," he said, "by what means it is raised, wherein it consists, in what manner it bursts out, and is so suddenly discharged, that though we were willing, it is out of our power to stifle it, and in what manner it all at once takes possession of our sides, of our mouth, our veins, our look, our eyes, let Democritus explain all these particulars; they are not to my present purpose, and if they were I should not at all be ashamed to say that I do not know them; for even they who pretend to account for them know nothing of the matter."

Quintilian followed Cicero in this as in most of his opinions. His book on the "Institutes of the Orator"

tells us that "scorn is close kin to laughter," and also that "deceiving the expectation" is a method of making people laugh. But its principal conclusion is that "none yet have satisfactorily expressed what laughter is, though many have tried it."

Evidently the problem was a good deal gently bandied about among the Romans as among the Greeks, and not very respectfully considered. And the proposal to make a virtue of giving it up did not die with them, either, but has held its place among the leading theories of humor. Galen adopted it. David Hume said that wit "cannot be defined but is discerned only by taste and sensation." Jean Paul declared that the ludicrous would "never go into the definitions of the philosophers except under compulsion." In our own day James Sully—whose long "Essay on Laughter" travels in a weary-thorough fashion all over this subject—seems to avoid any more final opinion than that laughter is a good thing and ought to be preserved if possible. Edward L. Thorndyke, in his "Educational Psychology," observes that the provocatives of laughter have not yet been included in any simple generalization, although he expresses the hope that they may be. The same hope was expressed by G. Stanley Hall, who sent out a questionnaire on "Tickling, Laughing and the Comic," and received in return three or four thousand items of information, which proved little but the enormous variety of the occasions of laughter, and persuaded him that "all current theories are utterly inadequate and specula-

tive." That they not only are, but always will be, inadequate, seems to be the opinion of the French psychologist Ribot, and of his pupil L. Dugas. In his "Psychologie du Rire" Dugas says that the occasions of laughter are too varied for any generalization to include, or any "psychological unity" ever to be found among them. A similar conclusion seems to have been reached *a priori* by the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce. In an article called "L'Umorismo" in the *Journal of Comparative Literature* he says that those who rightly understand the functions of descriptive psychology and literary criticism will "conclude by renouncing the vain pretense of finding the true (that is, rigorous and philosophic) definition of humor; and from the fact that no two psychologists are in accord upon its definition, will draw the inference for once correct; that humor is a word which applies to a group of representations that can never be separated out from their relations with a clear precision, except arbitrarily and for convenience." [1]

This sceptical tendency has its climax in an essay by L. Cazamian, to be found in the *Revue Germanique*, entitled "Why We Cannot Define Humor." In that essay, as also in Croce's, humor is not taken as we take

[1] Croce seems in this essay to leave open the possibility that "empirical psychology" may reach a definition of humor, although it will be of no value to the literary critic; and in his book on æsthetics he accepts, at least until a better one is offered, the mechanical theory of comic pleasure advanced by Theodor Lipps. It is hard to say just to what length he would extend his scepticism about the definition of "humor."

it, to designate the comic experience in general. The author thinks that Bergson's derision theory is a true account of the comic, but he is not satisfied with its application to those more subtle and complex transpositions of our ideas and sentiments which we describe as humor in the narrow sense. He really succeeds, therefore, in making apparent the inadequacy of Bergson's theory of laughter, and warrants our taking his own conclusion in a more sweeping sense than he may have intended.

"Humor escapes science," he says, "because its characteristic and constant elements are few in number and generally negative, while its variable elements are in number indeterminate, because its matter, as we have said, infinitely exceeds its form."

The ideal definition is to point to a thing. But it seems strange that this ideal should be so uniquely invoked in the matter of comic experience. There is no other subject, as we reflect upon it, besides God and laughter, toward which the scientific mind has ever advocated so explicit and particular a humility. And since we are, in the manner of all estimable historians, merely using this history for the greater glory of our own opinion, we may now proceed to explain just why it is that so many energetic minds have wanted to give up the attempt to generalize about laughter. It is because they have not been willing to *generalize enough*. Seeing that laughter is a peculiar thing, they have deemed it also an unusual thing. They have tried to explain it as an accompaniment of some spe-

cific conditions of fact or feeling, whereas it is an accompaniment of very general conditions—that of satisfaction, and that of dissatisfaction when the instincts are in a state of play. The thing to be explained by alluding to specific conditions is that sometimes an animal as social and as playful as mankind, even when he is alert and happy, is *not* found to be smiling!

CHAPTER III

THE DERISION THEORY

In the picture of history which learned instruction has built up in my imagination, a complete darkness prevails from a little after the time of Cicero until the time of Montaigne—the sun did not shine and nobody smiled in Europe from the second century to the fifteenth. I believe the fact is, however, that there was more light-hearted comedy abroad then than ever since. The church took care of our sorrows; our joy was our own. And so it is no surprise if one or two of the writers of that time did *generalize enough*, and gave a more simple and natural account of the occasions of laughter than any of the great philosophers who came after them. Saint Gregory of Nyssa, one of the most prayerful and holy and theological of fathers, was, I believe, the first psychologist to perceive that it does not require humor to make people laugh, but they are ready to laugh at anything or anybody who drops in on them with a flavor like good news.

"If one is gladdened," he said, "by a pleasant communication the ducts of the body will also be enlarged owing to the pleasure. Now in the case of pain the fine and invisible evaporations of the ducts are checked, and as the viscera within is bound in tighter position, the moist vapor is forced to the head and to the membrane of the brain. This vapor being accumulated in

the hollows of the brain is then pressed out through the ducts lying beneath to the eyes, where the contraction of the eyelashes segregates the moisture in the form of drops called tears. Likewise, on the other hand, it must be observed that if the ducts are enlarged beyond their accustomed size in consequence of the opposite affections, a quantity of air is drawn through them toward the depths, and is there again naturally expelled through the mouth, since the entire viscera, and especially it is said the liver, forcefully ejects this air by a convulsive and violent movement. Nature therefore provides for the passage of this air through an enlargement of the aperture of the mouth by means of the pushing apart of the cheeks enclosing the air. This condition is termed laughter."

This was in the fourth century. And after a space of one thousand years, in which many similar things may have got lost, or at least were buried too deep for me to find them, the same natural association of laughter with gladness appears in Castiglione's famous book "The Courtier":

"To describe a man the commune saiying is, He is a livinge creature that can laugh: because this laughing is perceived onlie in man, and (in maner) alwaies is a token of a certein jocundenesse and meerie moode that he feeleth inwardlie in his minde, which by nature is drawen to pleasantnesse and coveteth quietnes and refreshing, for whiche cause we see menne have invented many matters, as sportes, games and pastimes, and so many sundrie sortes of open showes."

That is the simple truth with which Castiglione begins his discussion of jests in the second book of "The Courtier." But soon after that naïve beginning he falls to plagiarizing from Cicero, and he then only

rehearses the two traditional opinions: first, that the object of laughter is a certain moderate meanness, and that jokes are "privie tauntes" or "nickes," which are not "of any grace without that litle bitynge"; and second, that "even as in Jestynge to speake contrary to expectacyon moveth laughter, so doeth in Meerie Pranckes to doe contrarie to expectacyon. . . . In both kindes the chief matter is to deceive opinion, and to answer otherwise then the hearer loketh for." Throughout his discourse, however, and his listing of jests, Castiglione retains a more genial and a deeper sense of their function than Cicero had, or anybody else, indeed, until our modern times. Some jests, he said, "have in them a certein cleannesse and modest pleasantnesse; other bite sometime privily, otherwhile openlye." But whatsoever causes laughter, "the same maketh the minde jocunde and geveth pleasure, nor suffreth a man in that instant to minde the troublesome greeffes that oure life is full of."

We may think of this as the last word spoken on the subject of laughter in freedom from the sovereign authority of Aristotle. What else the critics and commentators of the Renaissance had to say is but an amplification of the famous theory of comedy presented in his "Poetics." Tresseno in 1563 simply repeated that theory in its original form; Maggi added to Aristotle's definition of the occasion of laughter the idea of *surprise* and *suddenness;* and Robertelli in 1548, still describing the comic object as the slightly mean and ugly, developed the idea that the purpose of our

laughter at such objects is to supply a mild corrective, and help ourselves and others to avoid ungainliness and the small vices of life. Doctor Joubert, whose "Treatise upon Laughter," published in 1579, is the first exhaustive study of this subject, was also under the influence of Aristotle. He defined the ridiculous as "something ugly or unseemly, which is at the same time unworthy of pity or compassion." But he modified the rigor of this idea by observing that our laughter at this ridiculous thing "does not come of pure joy, but has some little of sadness."

Thus it was not by any means an advance, but a shrinkage of man's understanding of laughter, when Thomas Hobbes in the seventeenth century revived the derision theory of Plato and Aristotle in its most virulent form.

"*Sudden glory* is the passion which maketh those *Grimaces* called LAUGHTER," said Hobbes in the "Leviathan," "and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves. And it is incident most to them, that are conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves; who are forced to keep themselves in their own favour, by observing the imperfections of other men. And therefore much laughter at the defects of others, is a signe of Pusillanimity. For of great minds, one of the proper workes is, to help and free others from scorn; and compare themselves onely with the most able."

This is the most famous opinion about laughter ever expressed, and perhaps the most purely and per-

fectly incorrect. Hobbes so explicitly identified humorous enjoyment with egotism and scorn, and drew therefrom so wry and erroneous a moral, that we might almost dismiss his remarks as a treatise upon sneers, if it were not for the word *sudden* which is advanced strongly, and intimates that even this bitter taste of joy must come in against our expectation if it is to have the quality of a jest. Hobbes did not develop this intimation, however, nor himself perceive its significance, and the fame of his theory rests upon its lucid simpleness, rather than upon any broad kinship with the truth. It rests upon the poetic felicity of the name, "sudden glory."

Five or six different plans have been devised whereby to reconcile this conception of laughter with all the too evident facts to the contrary. The first was that one devised by Cicero—to say that when we laugh genially we are deriding ourselves. It was more fully developed by Robert de Lamennais in his "Esquisse d'une Philosophie."

> "The self," he said, "which discovers the ridiculous in one of the inferior regions of its being, separates itself from that at which it laughs, distinguishes itself from it, and rejoices inwardly at a sagacity which elevates it in its own esteem. Thus pride feeds even upon the sight of certain weaknesses concealed in the folds of the heart, and which it has been able to discover. I am not the dupe of myself—so we say—and we admire ourselves for that."

A second method of compensating for the inadequacy of his theory was proposed by Hobbes himself

in his "Human Nature," where he says that "Laughter *without offense* must be at *absurdities* and infirmities *abstracted* from persons."

A third method was to mix a little feeling of the justice of one's scorn, a little moral complacence, into the comic emotion. This was the contribution of Hobbes's contemporary, Descartes, who says in "The Passions of the Soul": "Derision or mockery is a kind of joy mixed with hate which comes from perceiving some little misfortune in a person whom we think worthy of it. We have hate for the evil, we have joy in seeing it in him who is worthy of it, and, when that happens unexpectedly, the surprise is the cause of our bursting out laughing."

A fourth and more ingenious way of tempering the derision theory was devised by the German psychologist A. Zeising. He declared that the comic is a process consisting of three phases, in only the last of which do we experience that feeling of self-elevation which causes laughter. The first phase is a shock caused by an object which seems to amount to something and yet does not; the second is a counter-shock in which we are freed from the deception and recognize the nothingness of the object; the third is our happy sense of superiority to that nothingness, which makes us burst out laughing.

Karl Groos adopted this general account of the comic process, but took one further step away from the derision theory by declaring that in the second phase there is a moment of "inward imitation" of the absurdity.

"The æsthetic attitude of consciousness," he said, "can be found nowhere but in the situation which lies between the shock of deception and the counter-shock of enlightenment. In the first phase my ego is repelled from the object, in the third phase it emerges from it laughing. It must therefore during the second phase have been in the object, and just this transporting of oneself into the object is the characteristic of æsthetic perception."

Comic perception becomes for him more and more æsthetic, then, in proportion as the proper cause of laughter, "superiority to an absurdity," is modified by a previous participation in the absurdity to which one feels superior.

Another German psychologist, Ziegler, explained that we laugh at the stupidities and misfortunes of others only when they are slight and inconsequential, and our scorn is essentially playful. And this qualification of the derision theory was also indorsed by Karl Groos with his phrase "fighting-play." But the total inadequacy of the derision theory even in this form, is indicated in the fact that while Groos and Ziegler attributed playful derision to the person who laughs, another equally plausible theorist had attributed the same mood to the object of laughter. It is *nature* who is deriding *us* in the comic experience, according to Stephan Schütze, bringing our intended sublimities to a fall, and showing us how limited our freedom really is—and what we enjoy is the more humble privilege of perceiving that she is playing a game!

The latest modification of the derision theory—proposed by Otto Schauer in 1910—may be described as

an attempt to reconcile these two exactly opposite views. Schauer identified all kinds of comic enterprise with teasing.

> "Teasing," he said, "is a game in which the players take the rôle of adversaries. One seeks to injure his adversary, one discloses his failings, one tries to deceive him, and so on. If the sport succeeds, it is naturally not *Schadenfreude* [joy in the suffering of others] nor a feeling of superiority that one experiences, but it is the joy of play. As was said before, it belongs to the nature of play that one enjoys it not only when others are hoodwinked or overcome, but also in the cases when one must himself play the rôle of the hoodwinked and overcome."

On the basis of these observations Schauer would divide all comic experience into two kinds, the objective-comic and the subjective-comic, the jokes in which we triumph and the jokes in which we are triumphed over.

If our own theory is the true one, it is evident that Schauer was exceedingly "warm." He was feeling in the right vicinity for the essence of humor, and had he but freed himself entirely from the assumption that egoistic hostility is fundamental in laughter, and so from his preoccupation with "teasing," he might have made the necessary analysis of that more general idea, "the joy of play." As it is, he remains the maturest of those who have tried to explain away a gratuitous assumption.

Miss Lillien J. Martin, in one of the few empirical studies of humor that have been made, submitted to sixty persons a comic picture excellently fit to give rise to the feeling of "superiority to an absurdity," and

asked them to describe their emotions. Her statement of the result was that "thirty-seven of the reagents have a feeling of superiority. . . . The remaining twenty-three report themselves as having no such feeling." I looked at the picture, and was able to add one more to the twenty-three, which makes twenty-four, and that is the sum of the empirical testimony upon this ancient subject of dispute. The picture excited in me a comic emotion, and I enjoyed it. I remember liking one of the absurd creatures that made me laugh. And yet I realize that if I myself had been in the picture, and all those "reagents" had come up and laughed while looking at me, I should have felt the superiority of the whole sixty, whether they did or not. I should have been impelled to attribute scorn to them because they were "making fun of me," even though I knew that their own mood and motive was simply to *make fun.*

M. Dugas says that "The English humorists offer models of raillery cruel, sarcastic, and cold; it is natural that a corresponding theory of laughter should be met with among English philosophers." But I do not know any English philosopher who accepted Hobbes's Theory without finding some way to soften its voice, or elude the extreme rigors of its application. Joseph Addison in some essays in *The Spectator* on the subject of False Wit, deferring to the authority of Hobbes, speaks of that "secret elation and pride of heart which is generally called laughter." But elsewhere in the

same essays he commends the more genial, if rather meaningless, statement of John Locke, that wit lies "most in the assemblage of ideas, and putting those together with quickness and variety, wherein can be found any resemblance and congruity, thereby to make up pleasant pictures and agreeable visions in the fancy." Lord Shaftesbury and Francis Hutcheson both attacked Hobbes's theory, and Hutcheson improved upon Locke by describing the cause of laughter as "the bringing together of images which have contrary additional ideas, as well as some resemblance in the principal idea." Alexander Bain, in "The Emotions and Will," said that "although Hobbes's explanation might not be literally correct, yet he has probably touched, after all, upon one real point of this much disputed phenomenon. . . . Not in physical effects alone, but in everything whence a man can achieve a stroke of superiority, in surpassing or discomfiting a rival, is the disposition to laughter apparent." But Bain also insisted that this was not the only nor indeed the principal cause of laughter, and he occupies a more distinguished place in another part of the story we are telling.

George Meredith, in his tense but rather inconsequential "Essay on Comedy," while aligning himself with those who regard laughter as fundamentally an act of rejection, is nevertheless so concerned to paint a sage and humane understanding into his portrait of the Comic Spirit that he too may be quoted in mitigation as well as in support of the theory of Hobbes.

"If you believe that our civilization is founded in common-sense (and it is the first condition of sanity to believe it), you will, when contemplating men, discern a Spirit overhead; not more heavenly than the light flashed upward from glassy surfaces, but luminous and watchful; never shooting beyond them, nor lagging in the rear; so closely attached to them that it may be taken for a slavish reflex, until its features are studied. It has the sage's brows, and the sunny malice of a faun lurks at the corners of the half-closed lips drawn in an idle wariness of half tension. That slim feasting smile, shaped like the long-bow, was once a big round satyr's laugh, that flung up the brows like a fortress lifted by gunpowder. The laugh will come again, but it will be of the order of the smile, finely tempered, showing sunlight of the mind, mental richness rather than noisy enormity. Its common aspect is one of unsolicitous observation, as if surveying a full field and having leisure to dart on its chosen morsels without any fluttering eagerness. Men's future upon earth does not attract it; their honesty and shapeliness in the present does; and whenever they wax out of proportion, overblown, affected, pretentious, bombastical, hypocritical, pedantic, fantastically delicate; whenever it sees them self-deceived or hoodwinked, given to run riot in idolatries, drifting into vanities, congregating in absurdities, planning shortsightedly, plotting dementedly; whenever they are at variance with their professions, and violate the unwritten but perceptible laws binding them in consideration one to another; whenever they offend sound reason, fair justice; are false in humility or mined with conceit, individually, or in the bulk—the Spirit overhead will look humanely malign and cast an oblique light on them, followed by volleys of silvery laughter. That is the Comic Spirit."

That is at least a rare beautification of Hobbes's theory of the Comic Spirit, and is characteristic of what happened to that theory in England. The philosophers who seized the standard of "sudden glory," and advanced it without mercy or consideration either

for facts or the opinions of their contemporaries, are in fact the Frenchmen Hugues Felicité Robert de Lamennais and Henri Bergson.

De Lamennais, in his "Esquisse d'une Philosophie," says that "Laughter never gives to the physiognomy an expression of sympathy and of good will: exactly the contrary, it makes the most harmonious faces grimace, it effaces beauty, it is one of the images of evil." What Lamennais means by evil is the sentiment of individuality, the attachment to self, as opposed to the tendency to lose oneself in the universal life. Even the first smile of an infant he describes as a movement toward self, and declares that smiling is evil only at a less high elevation than the more open grimace.

"Whatever be the cause which provokes laughter," he says, "go to the bottom of it, and you will find it constantly accompanied, whether one avow it to himself or not, with a secret satisfaction of *amour-propre*, of I know not what malign pleasure. Whoever laughs at another believes himself at that moment superior to him in the aspect in which he views him, and which excites his laughter, and the laugh is everywhere the expression of the contentment which this real or imaginary superiority inspires."

Upon the basis of these opinions Lamennais gives the extreme contradiction to that assertion of Socrates in the "Symposium" that the genius of comedy and tragedy are the same. The one is moral and the other immoral, according to him.

"The one has its root in the instincts, the sympathetic powers, which lead man toward other men, and tend to unite him to

them by the universal bond of sublime love; the other, on the contrary, is directly related to the sentiment of individuality, has its basis in the love of self, and tends to develop the egoistic instincts."

Bergson differs from Lamennais only in a more lenient temper, and in that he has found a use for this hostile grimace, and from the standpoint of the hopes of evolution, is able to call it good.

"In laughter," he says, "we always find an unavowed intention to humiliate, and consequently to correct our neighbor, if not in his will, at least in his deed. . . . Laughter is incompatible with emotion. Depict some fault, however trifling, in such a way as to arouse sympathy, fear, or pity; the mischief is done, it is impossible for us to laugh."

It seems as though these authors never enjoyed a moment of hilarity, and I am sure that they never came into cordial relations with a baby. For either of these experiences would have taught them more than all they have said in their discourses about laughter. Bergson's ideas have the plausibility, however, that is possessed by everything interesting, and his account of the nature of the inferiorities we correct with laughter has gained credence because of its relation to his beautiful philosophy of Creative Evolution. He describes these inferiorities as "the rigid, the ready-made, the mechanical, in contrast with the supple, the ever-changing and the living, absent-mindedness in contrast with attention, in a word automatism in contrast with free activity." Laughter is on the side of life and of

intelligence always, he says. We never laugh at a thing. What we laugh at is "that side of a person which reveals his likeness to a thing, that aspect of human events which, through its peculiar inelasticity, conveys the impression of pure mechanism, of automatism, of movement without life. Consequently it expresses an individual or collective imperfection which calls for an immediate corrective. This corrective is laughter. . . ."

There is a true significance in Bergson's assertion that we never laugh at a thing. We are not easily able to project our expectations into things, and imagine them as adopting attitudes of purpose, and they are not often, therefore, the purveyors to our imagination of what I have called practical humor. It is only as objects of poetic perception that they can seem funny to us, and then only when we are led to approach them in an attitude of play—as we are, for instance, in these remarks from the pen of Irvin Cobb:

"There are certain things which both writers and comedians have found by testing to be almost as funny for general purposes as whiskers. . . . A cheese is always funny, whether written about, described or exhibited. Limburger is the funniest brand with Camembert next. Right alongside of cheese, and running it a close race in the popular favor as a humor asset, I would rate the onion. The lemon, which has attained a sort of transient hold on the public fancy here of late years, can never, in my humble opinion, hope to rival the onion as a permanent favorite. It lacks the drawing and holding qualities of the onion. After all a lemon isn't near as funny, really, as a banana. But the onion is immortal; it is an epic; it is elemental humor. And so

is cheese. *Semper Edam,* as the Latins say, signifying, I take it, 'Always the cheese. . . .'

"A ham is funny, a sausage is positively uproarious, and fish-balls are sort of laughable; but a veal stew is regarded as possessing few, if any, of the true elements of humor. Soup is still funny, but not as funny as it was a few years back. Hash is immensely humorous, but a croquette is not. Yet, what is a croquette but hash that has come to a head?"

We have here the authority of a flourishing humorist for the assertion that things can be laughable, and also a kind of demonstration that they are. And it would seem, too, from his testimony, that the most inert things are not usually so laughable as those which show signs of an *élan vital.* One of Aristophanes's great jokes was the coming to life of an intelligent corpse on its way to hell. And I remember an appearance of Barnum's Circus in which the chief comedy part was played by an empty Ford car, which followed its master about in a most diligently understanding fashion, and whose each sagacious act was greeted with uproarious screams from those who knew its mechanical inwards all too well. We do not only laugh when intelligent creatures behave like machines; we laugh also when machines behave like intelligent creatures; and we laugh oftener than that.

It is the art of satire, and not the nature of laughter, that Bergson has written about. And we might perhaps point to Molière and Daumier and Anatole France as among the greatest refiners of this art, and so assert—in the face of M. Dugas—that France is the peculiar

home of the humor that laughs through its teeth. It happens, however, that such an assertion would have no more objective truth than his own statement about England, or than any other of the vanities of intellectual patriotism. The greatest jovial laugher of all the universe was François Rabelais, and the philosopher who first fully realized the affirmative character of laughter in general—if we except that very hydraulic Saint and that genial Courtier of whom I have spoken—was Voltaire.

"Laughter always arises," said Voltaire, "from a gaiety of disposition, absolutely incompatible with contempt and indignation."

How delightful is the positiveness of his opinion! It may well relieve us of obeisance to an ungracious theory, which might perhaps never have arisen but for an accidental connection of the muscles with which we express scorn and pleasure.

CHAPTER IV

THE DISAPPOINTMENT THEORY

Spinoza was a more careful philosopher than Hobbes, and the most grave and consecrated reasoner about real good and evil that ever lived. His judgment, therefore, that derision is an evil thing, a thing that hinders the being of man, but that jests promote his being and are good, is of greater weight than the casual remarks of more discursive philosophers. It is testimony of some consequence in a science which must rest to a great extent upon introspective feeling. Spinoza had classified derision, with propriety according to his system, as one of the forms of hate, and he added:

"I recognize a great difference between derision (which in Corollary 1 above is termed bad) and laughter or jest. For laughter and jest are a kind of joy, and so, if they are only not excessive are good."

Even before Spinoza, indeed, there was opposition to the idea of Hobbes and Descartes that mockery and scornful pride are in the heart of all laughter. There was still living the other opinion of Aristotle, as appears in the remark of Pascal that "Nothing produces laughter more than a surprising disproportion between that which one expects and that which

one sees." This opinion did not rise to a position of authority in modern philosophy, however, until it appeared in the æsthetics of Immanuel Kant. Kant's statement is as boldly unqualified as that of Hobbes, and would shine out as clearly in memory, had it been as ably expressed.

"*Laughter,*" he says, "*is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing.*" And after a few words of illustration: "We must note well that it does not transform itself into the positive opposite of an expected object—for then there would still be something, which might even be a cause of grief—but it must be transformed into nothing."

As an example he cites the story of "a merchant returning from India to Europe with all his wealth in merchandise, who was forced to throw it overboard in a heavy storm, and who grieved thereat so much that his *wig* turned gray the same night." He says that in relating this story we should describe the merchant's grief very circumstantially, so that our hearers will be led to expect some vast evidence of anguish in the conclusion, and then they will "laugh and be gratified" all the more at the nothing which arrives.

Kant's example reveals both the correctness and the inadequacy of his theory. For the statement that a man's wig turned gray is in truth "nothing"—a pretentious nothing—from the standpoint of the specific expectation involved; but from the standpoint of our general sentimental contempt for merchants, and the pecuniary sources of their grief, it is also decidedly

something. And the something—unlucky for the author—is "sudden glory" of the most obvious kind.

Kant's idea was repeated, and a little of the metaphysical excitement about freedom and necessity imported into it, by Friedrich Schelling, but until the time of Schopenhauer it was not intelligibly altered or developed. Schopenhauer was like a god in his conviction of the truth and originality of his own opinions, but I cannot see that he did much in this field except to narrow the conception of Kant so that it applied only to disappointments of an intellectual kind.

"The cause of laughter in every case," he said, "is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity. . . . The more correct the subsumption of such objects under a concept may be from one point of view, and the greater and more glaring their incongruity with it, from another point of view, the greater is the ludicrous effect which is produced by this contrast. All laughter then is occasioned by a paradox, and therefore by unexpected subsumption, whether this is expressed in words or actions. This, briefly stated, is the true explanation of the ludicrous." And again: "In everything that excites laughter it must always be possible to show a concept and a particular, that is, a thing or event, which certainly can be subsumed under that concept, and therefore thought through it, yet in another and more predominating aspect does not belong to it at all, but is strikingly different from everything else that is thought through that concept. If, as often occurs, especially in witticisms, instead of such a real object of perception, the concept of a subordinate species is brought under the higher concept of the genus, it will yet excite laughter only through the

fact that the imagination realizes it, *i. e.*, makes a perceptible representative stand for it, and thus *the conflict between what is thought and what is perceived* takes place."

If we examine all these great words carefully, we shall find that they are only the rather formidable definition of a *mistake*. And it is interesting to remember that long before their appearance Voltaire, in his Preface to "L'Enfant Prodigue," had observed that "a mistake" is the only thing that ever awakens "violent peals of universal laughter." Schopenhauer added to this, however, an original attempt to explain *why* mistakes awaken laughter.

"In every suddenly appearing conflict," he said, "between what is perceived and what is thought, what is perceived is always unquestionably right; for it is not subject to error at all, requires no confirmation from without, but answers for itself. Its conflict with what is thought springs ultimately from the fact that the latter, with its abstract conceptions, cannot get down to the infinite multifariousness and fine shades of difference of the concrete. This victory of knowledge of perception over thought affords us pleasure. For perception is the original kind of knowledge inseparable from animal nature, in which everything that gives direct satisfaction to the will presents itself. It is the medium of the present, of enjoyment and gayety; moreover it is attended with no exertion. . . . Besides, it is the conceptions of thought that often oppose the gratification of our immediate desires, for as the medium of the past, the future, and of seriousness, they are the vehicle of our fears, our repentance, and all our cares. It must therefore be diverting to us to see this strict, untiring, troublesome governess, the reason, for once convicted of insufficiency. On this account then the mien or appearance of laughter is very closely related to that of joy."

It seems that Schopenhauer enjoyed with a deep understanding those jokes whose affirmative value is what we have called reality, or the simple truth. But it needs little argument to show that this value cannot explain the enjoyment of jokes in general. In the first place we have no such exclusive zeal as this for perceptual knowledge. In the second place what zeal we have is not humorous. And in the third place we do not need to make intellectual mistakes in order to enjoy humor. We do not need to "subsume particulars under a concept," or even indeed to exercise that degree of imagination implied in the word "expect." We need only to experience a forward motion of interest sufficiently definite so that its "coming to nothing" can be felt. This might have been brought home to Schopenhauer by calling his attention to the humorous quality which is sometimes possessed by music, for he was very sure that music has to do with "the will" and not "the idea." I read in the London *Spectator* that Beethoven exhibits a humor "freakish, unexpected and at times obstreperous," and I suppose the statement will pass without challenge, although his music is, for the most part, faithful to the view of Schopenhauer, and does not pretend to represent things or ideas. Its humor cannot be reconciled with Schopenhauer's statement that "it is possible to trace everything laughable to a syllogism of the first figure with an undisputed major and unexpected minor, which to a certain extent is only sophistically valid." And neither can the innumerable little giggles and fleet smiles of im-

pulsive and real life be reconciled with it. Comic laughter is too quick for Schopenhauer's description. It is more like a reflex action than a mental result. It arises in the very act of perception, when that act is brought to nothing by two conflicting qualities of fact or feeling. It arises when some numb habitual activity, suddenly obstructed, first appears in consciousness with an announcement of its own failure. The blockage of an instinct, a collision between two instincts, the interruption of a habit, a "conflict of habit systems," a disturbed or misapplied reflex—all these catastrophes, as well as the coming to nothing of an effort at conceptual thought, must enter into the meaning of the word *disappointment*, if it is to explain the whole field of practical humor. The "strain" in that expectation Kant speaks of is what makes it capable of humorous collapse. It is an active expectation. The feelings are involved. The will, as Schopenhauer in all other matters taught us to know, is fundamental, and humor is one of its own children.

Schopenhauer does not seem to have been conscious of the extreme intellectualism of his view of humor, but Léon Dumont, who adopted the same view, made this the essential feature of it.

"We laugh," he said, "every time that our intelligence finds itself in the presence of facts which are of a nature to make us think of one and the same thing, that it is and that it is not. . . . We are, for example, accustomed to associate the idea of such a quality to the idea of such an exterior sign; if this sign appears, the idea of the quality which is associated with it will be imme-

diately suggested to the mind; but if, at the same moment, we discover by other signs that the object has not at all this quality, that it possesses indeed the contrary quality, there is produced in the intelligence a peculiar collision, a shock from which the rebound makes itself felt in the diaphragm and translates itself into laughter."

In order to prove that this comic collision occurs "in the intelligence," and not anywhere else, Dumont made an investigation of the fine art of tickling, which is memorable as one of the few ventures into this field in the spirit of empirical science.

"Announce to an irritable person," he said, "that you are going to pinch him at such a place and at such a moment; if he perceives the sensation just at the moment and the place that he expected it, he does not laugh at all. Make, on the contrary, a gesture as though to pinch him, and do not really pinch him, he laughs immediately. . . . Does not this lead us to think that the laughter depends less upon sensations of the skin than upon a deceived expectation? . . . .

"We have made the following observations upon tickling:

"1st. When one passes a finger over the skin of another person, without any change of direction or of speed and without interruption, one does not make him laugh; it is not tickling.

"2nd. When one makes successive touches follow each other at the same place or in a constant direction, one does not cause laughter either, if the touches take place at equal intervals of time. But laughter is produced when the intervals are not the same.

"3rd. Laughter is produced also when, the intervals being equal, there are unexpected changes in the direction of the successive touches.

"4th. When there is no interruption of contact, one may still cause laughter, either by varying the rapidity, or changing the direction of the movements.

"5th. We do not laugh when we tickle ourselves.

"To sum up, the laughter appears to have its cause not in the sensation of contact itself, but in the variations of speed, of direction or of interval. It is further necessary that the variations be unexpected, and that is why one cannot cause laughter by tickling himself."

I believe the reader will find that he cannot completely verify these observations. It is true that a deceived expectation is enough all by itself to cause laughter, but it is not true that laughter cannot be caused without deceiving the expectation. M. Dumont has observed and proven the fact that our laughter in tickling is peculiarly independent of the actual sensations of touch, but in passing from that to the assertion that it depends upon an intellectual factor, he is guided by his theory rather than by the facts. The peculiarity here is not only that we laugh loudly when we are not touched at all after vividly awaiting it, but also that we laugh happily when we are touched, even though the sensation is so acute as to be in its own intrinsic nature painful. James Sully agrees with Dumont that "some conceptual factor" must explain our pleasure in this apparently unpleasant experience. But Oswald Külpe comes nearer, I believe, to the true explanation, when he says that "The expressive movement of laughter, which often accompanies tickling and stands in apparent contradiction to the movements of repulsion, is probably not the effect of the common sensation but of feelings arising from the comicality of the situation." Any one who has ever

participated in a tickling bout will smile at the idea that his laughter was attendant upon the perception of a "situation," and he may think that "expressive movement" is a very unrealistic name for it. But nevertheless the words "feeling" and "comicality," if Külpe had not artificially separated them, do offer the one possibility of a simple description of this experience. It is a *comical feeling*, and not "some conceptual factor," that enters in when laughter mingles with our movements of defense. And that this happens only in that condition of the instincts which we describe as play, is nowhere more expressly stated than in Sully's own account.

"The tickling must fit in with a particular mood, the state of mind which makes enjoyment of fun not only possible but welcome. . . . The dreadfully serious 'on the alarm' attitude of the child when nursed by a stranger is an effectual bar to playful overtures. A child when cross will not, says Dr. L. Hill, give genial response, even if the attacker be his familiar tickler, father or nurse; and the same is true, he adds, of a child when suffering from vaccination, or when mentally preoccupied with some hurt for which he is seeking for sympathy, or with a story which he wants you to tell him. As Darwin puts it, the great subjective condition of the laughter of tickling is that the child's mind be in 'a pleasurable condition,' the state of mind which welcomes fun in all its forms."

All these observations support the hypothesis that the play-attitude is a definite condition of our nervous systems, and that the humorous instinct is somehow inherent in the attitude of play. And I think that

Dumont's experiments also, so far as they can be verified, tend rather to the same conclusion. His business-like tickling must have had somewhat the same lifeless quality as an explained joke. What we have to thank him for, therefore, is just the experimental confirmation of Kant's assertion that a strained expectation which comes to *absolutely nothing* may cause a humorous recoil.

Two other empirical studies have given some support to what I call the disappointment theory of laughter. Miss Lillien J. Martin, in her "experimental prospecting" in this field, presented to sixty persons who had been observing their feelings in the presence of funny things a number of classic definitions of the comic, and a majority selected that of Schopenhauer as the truest to their experience. They also agreed that an element of "unexpectedness," as well as of "contrast," was always present in the things at which they laughed. And they confirmed the popular impression that jokes as they grow familiar, and capable of being quickly anticipated, cease to have any comic quality whatever.

This impression was further confirmed and a little modified through a series of experiments conducted by H. L. Hollingsworth, who succeeded in demonstrating with an elaborate system of curves the rate at which various jokes wane in value as they grow stale. He discovered that while all jokes wane more rapidly and completely than is usual with verbal objects of esteem, they do not all wane with equal rapidity and completeness. A certain group which are very much

appreciated at first, lose their value faster than the others and, from being selected among the best of the group at the beginning of the experiments, arrive among the poorest at the end, while some even increase in value a little upon second or third acquaintance. This result was offered by the author as a possible support to Schauer's distinction between the objective and the subjective comic, but I do not believe that any one distinction would explain it. Poetic jokes endure longer than practical jokes, and yet they cannot be "cracked" quite so smartly at the beginning. And jokes whose value lies mainly in what they *do* mean, endure longer than those whose main value is the absurdity of their not meaning what they seem to. Hollingsworth does not feel sure enough about Schauer's hypothesis, or about these jokes of his, to present them for our consideration, and as the theme and principal outcome of his study was to establish the peculiar vapidity of repeated jokes, it seems fair to give a part at least of the credit of his testimony to the Disappointment Theory. It is because they require a "strained expectation" that practical jokes can not be fully enjoyed but once.

And so this theory, which Aristotle first expressed in his "Rhetoric," has found at least as much support in modern science as the more famous one in the "Poetics." It is a fact worth remembering also, that in the Oriental books which correspond to Aristotle's "Rhetoric" and "Poetics," and which more nearly approach a real psychology of the emotions, the

flavor of the derision theory is entirely absent, and the cause of laughter is described as something "strange" or "distorted"—that is, contrary to our customary expectations. In the Dásarūpa, a Sanskrit treatise on the forms of the drama dating from the tenth century, we learn that "mirth (hasa) is caused by one's own or another's strange actions, words, or attire; the development of this is declared to be the comic sentiment (hasya)." And in the "Sahitya Darpana," or "Mirror of Composition," a similar opinion is expressed in these words:

> "The comic in which the permanent condition is mirth, and which *according to the fancy of the mythologists*, is white-colored, and has the attendants of Siva as its presiding deities—may arise from the fun of distorted shapes, words, dresses, gestures, etc. Whatever a person laughs at, when he beholds it distorted in respect of form, speech, or gesture, this they call the 'substantial' *element of the comic.*"

These philosophers succeeded, as Aristotle did not, in describing the comic object upon the stage in a way consistent with their description of the comic element in a joke. And their tribute to the Disappointment Theory may be strengthened with the observation often repeated in modern books about humor that children and savages usually greet with laughter anything that is *new*.

The Disappointment Theory has also found expression in modern literature, and may be summed up once more in the words of William Hazlitt:

"We weep at what thwarts or exceeds our desires in serious matters, we laugh at what only disappoints our expectations in trifles."

It is in the general tenor of this theory that the most original contributions of modern thought to the science of humor have been made.

CHAPTER V

THE DISCOVERY OF BENIGN HUMOR

The first of these modern contributions was the discovery and celebration of benign humor as a great and significant kind of wisdom, an art and yet also a philosophy of gracious life. This discovery was authenticated and recorded in literature by the German romantics and by Jean Paul Richter and Hegel and his disciples, but it was not made by them nor by any person who can be identified. It was made by the English language. In the centuries before Shakespeare the word *humor*, which signifies in its origin a condition of moisture, was applied to those four fluids which were supposed to determine the temperament of the individual—blood, phlegm, choler, and black choler or melancholy. It was throughout the Middle Ages a physiological word. But as early at least as the year 1475 it began to be applied to the temperaments themselves, or the states of emotion created by a varying mixture of these fluids. In a passage of "Othello" we can see this transition still occurring:

"Is he not jealous?" says Emil, and Desdemona replies:

> "Who he? I think the sun where he was born
> Drew all such humors from him."

The moods and characters which bother us enough to compel our seeking a physiological explanation are

naturally the ugly or sad ones, and for that reason this physiological word had at first a rather dark connotation. "The Duke is humorous," in "As You Like It," probably means "The Duke is grouchy!" And that is the temper of the French word *humeur*, when it is not modified by an adjective, even to-day. But in English, in proportion as the physiological reminiscence dropped away, the word *humor* was more and more used to signify any pronounced tendency or disposition whatever. The idea of irreducible character and individuality came into it. I think the word "humorist" in Shakespeare means a person who entertains by a consistently quaint or eccentric or obstreperous behavior, rather than by an ugly or ill-natured behavior. It is the same quality of entertainment that Aristotle, lacking any single word, described in his "Rhetoric" as "saying out-of-the-way things." And so it was along this path of appreciating the unique or unexpected in character—a kind of consecration of whims and human accidents, that the word humor in the century following Shakespeare crept into the language of those who discussed laughter and the comic. And it brought to them a great illumination and warming up of their ideas. It permitted them to associate laughter with love, and prepared them to welcome with a special terminology the new and exceedingly good-natured works of comic genius which were soon to appear—the works of Fielding and Sterne and Goldsmith, and of Jean Paul Richter.

English literary patriots have frequently maintained

that humor was not only discovered, but actually born, upon the British Islands—a fact which need not surprise those Americans who think that by comparison with them the British possess no humor at all, since these two opinions have the same fond motive, and the same want of facts to support them. Humor was not born upon any island, nor does it make its abode in the breast of any chosen people. There is indeed a question whether it can be claimed as a distinguishing attribute of mankind. But we can safely predict that if that question is ever decided by some distinguished scientist in the negative, and certain of the higher animals are admitted into the circles of those who know when to laugh, they will be French poodles, or Scotch collies, or English bulldogs, or Belgian hares, or American jackasses, or some other patriotic blood-cousins of the scientist himself. For it is a universal law of the history of folly that the sense of humor should be conceived to stop at the boundaries of every nationality, no matter what other commodities may pass across.

Humor is universal and as old as the origins of man, but because the first men who thought about humor analytically were intellectual in their tastes, and because they confused laughter with the act of scoffing, the earliest names and definitions of humor described only its more intellectual and bitter forms. With the great thrusting forth of popular and simple life into literature and art which has characterized our modern era, the inadequacy of all those names and definitions became evident, and in the eighteenth century the

English word *humor* was adopted into every one of the languages of western civilization, from Finland to the Spanish peninsula, to describe the more genial and characteristic excursions of the comic spirit. That is the extraordinary thing which has happened. And because these excursions are more characteristic, and more revealing of the original function of laughter in the history of life, than satire, or wit, or what we are now inclined to call comic, the word humor is gradually supplanting such words as a designation of the subject of this science in general. And that phrase, "The sense of humor"—a casual expression, I believe, even in the eighteenth century—is becoming an established name for this instinct which responds to playful pains and to poetic and practical jokes with laughter. The creation of that name is the most original and the most profound contribution of modern thought to the problem of the comic.

It would be idle to rehearse the attempts of all the literary critics and philosophers of sentiment in all languages to define the word humor, and distinguish it from the rather hard, reptilly thing they had conceived the comic in general to be. Out of twenty-five or thirty of these definitions which I have read, I can extract this much of common agreement, that there is an absence of scorn in humor, a presence of emotion, and that humor is an excellent thing. Carlyle's definition is characteristic:

"True humor springs not more from the head than from the heart; it is not contempt, its essence is love; it issues not in

laughter, but in still smiles which lie far deeper. It is a sort of inverse sublimity, exalting, as it were, into our affection what is below us, while sublimity draws down into our affections what is above us."

It was from the German that Carlyle borrowed the flavor of these beautiful sentences. And wherever it may have been born, it was in Germany that the literary appreciation of humor flourished to its heaviest bloom. For Jean Paul and those who followed him, humor was not only an art, but also an ethics and a philosophy of life. What we laugh at, he thought, is the petty, the infinitesimal, when it is brought into contrast with our ideal of infinite sublimity. And since all human things are, in contrast with that ideal, petty and infinitesimal, the tendency of our laughter is to promote sympathy for mankind, and give at the same time the greater glory to God. Jean Paul ingeniously explained that when we laugh at the stupidity of other people, it is only because we have imputed, or as he says "loaned," to them our insight, and thus in them been able to perceive the contrast between a minimum and a maximum of such insight. His metaphysical grandiloquizing upon the terms *sublime* and *ridiculous*, *infinitely little* and *infinitely great*, is fruitless of true meaning, and that I suppose was the essence of its emotional value. But his mellow assertion that "the jest has no other purpose but its own being—the poetic bloom of its nettle does not sting, and one can scarcely feel the blow of its flowering switch full of leaves," was reinforced

with a good caustic criticism of Hobbes's theory of laughter.

"In the first place," he said, "the feeling of pride is very serious, and not at all related to the comic, albeit related to contempt which is likewise serious. In laughter one feels not so much that he himself is elevated (often perhaps the contrary) as that others are lowered. That tickle of self-comparison would have to enter as comic pleasure into every perception of the errors of others, and be the more laughable the higher one stood, but the contrary is true, one often experiences with pain the subjection of others. . . . Laughers are good-natured and place themselves often in rank and file with those they laugh at; children and women laugh most; the proud self-comparer the least; and the harlequin who holds himself worthless laughs over everything, and the proud Mussulman over nothing. No one is ashamed of having laughed, but we should be ashamed of such a gross elevation of ourselves as Hobbes describes. And finally no laugher takes it badly, but right well, if a hundred thousand others laugh with him, and thus a hundred thousand self-elevations surround his; which would be impossible if Hobbes were right."

Jean Paul is the only humorist who ever diligently tried to explain humor, and his testimony upon the side of the genial explanation is important. He tells us that to him in the mood of comic enjoyment, anything satirical "sharply bursting out" was actually "disturbing," and that confession is of more value than his theory. It may be placed alongside Aristophanes's praise of Comedy, and Rabelais's definition of Pantagruelism, and Voltaire's exclamation about laughter, and the remark that I quoted from Charlie Chaplin,

in proof that humorists at least have not been numb to the original quality of humor. And thereto may be added Laurence Sterne's assertion that if his book "is wrote against anything—'tis wrote, an' please your worships, against the spleen," and Byron's confession that

> "If I laugh at any mortal thing,
> 'Tis that I may not weep."

Even Heine's bitter praise of laughter concludes with a refrain in harmony with this more genial view.

> "And when the heart in the body is torn,
> Torn and bleeding and broken,
> We still have laughter beautiful and shrill."

Hegel was not so wise as Jean Paul in his appreciation of laughter, which he described as "little more than an expression of self-satisfied shrewdness," but he drew a sharp distinction between the ridiculous objects which cause this expression and the humor which we enjoy a little more soberly. And he brought all the weight of his authority, and the additional weight of his unintelligibility, to the opinion that true humor invites us to a sympathetic experience, and that the highest form of comedy is that in which the character himself enjoys his superiority to circumstance.

"Inseparable from the comic," he said, "is an infinite geniality and confidence, capable of rising superior to its own contradiction, and experiencing therein no taint of bitterness nor sense of misfortune whatever. It is the happy frame of mind, a hale condition of soul, which, fully aware of itself, can suffer the dissolution of its aims."

Hegel cited the Comedies of Aristophanes and the character of Sir John Falstaff as examples of this true and highest kind of humor. But he might also have had the support of the ancient Sanscrit dramatists, or at least of their philosopher-critics. The comic excitants, says the "Sahitya Darpana," "cannot be realized in their completeness, unless we suppose a Hero, under the influence of the sentiment, exhibiting his sense of the ludicrous by external marks. . . . These excitants, are apprehended by reason of there being through sympathy an indentification *of the spectator with the actor;* and thence is this flavor, 'the comic,' experienced by the spectators."

In spite of this wisdom of his simpler self, Hegel's philosophizing about humor was less laudatory than that of Jean Paul. Seeing that in comic laughter we are inwardly pleased at what outwardly seems unsatisfactory, he declared that the "Absolute Idea" which has been seeking in the other forms of art to embody itself in the objective world, here gives up the attempt, and simply turns back to expatiate in its own inner self. Thus "it is comedy that opens a way to the dissolution of all that art implies."

It was the task of Hegel's followers to prevent this disaster from flowing logically out of the postulates of his system, and they fulfilled it with a "German thoroughness." Humor ascended in their speculations to a height even above that to which Jean Paul had assigned it. Weisse, in his "System of Æsthetics," declared that humor, instead of destroying art, en-

riches it by raising the ugly and distasteful into its domain, and he defined the comic as "ugliness elevated or the reconstitution of beauty out of her absolute negation." In the main, however, it was not by defending our right to ignore the objective character of things that Hegel's followers outwitted him, but by pointing out that in the humor of art an objective value does usually come to the support of that inward "expatiation" of the Idea, which he had declared to be the essence of this experience. That is to say, in plain language, that as he had glorified the negative, they glorified the positive, element in the point of a joke.

"The comic," says Lotze, "does not empty the objective world of the Idea in order to let subjective phantasy reign in its place, but rather it moves us to rejoice in the fact that the Idea cannot be driven out of reality. This, with the additional remark, however, that the idea which remains in the world is not the same one contemplated from the opposite point-of-view. That all beautiful individual schemes of definite æsthetic formation come to nothing, the comic does indeed teach us; it comforts us only in this, that the Idea remains underlying as a universal formless infinite possibility for the emerging of these individual ever-transitory formations."

By such arguments humor was raised upon the wings of German philosophy almost to the height of a devotion, and it was actually defined by one pious philosopher, Lazarus, as "the religion of the mind."

"For the mind in humor," he said, "is related to the Idea and to Reality exactly as the whole feeling of man in religion is related to God and the World. The two basic elements of religion

are just these, that on the one hand man finds himself and all the world deeply bowed and humiliated, because finite and sinful, feeble and transitory, before his God, but that on the other hand he feels himself elevated over all the world and towards his God, who is near even to his sinful heart, and he is certain that he will ultimately wander or be led into the heavenly light. Similarly the humorous mind sees itself and its actual life far from the Idea, powerless to attain its goal and its desire, and therefore tamed and broken in its pride, and oft even condemned to the despondent fierce laughter of self-contempt, and yet on the other hand elevated and purified through the consciousness that in spite of all, it possesses the Idea and the Infinite within itself, and in its even so imperfect works it reveals them and lives them forth, and is itself most inwardly at one with them, if only through the painful recognition they bring of its own imperfection."

Thus the simple scientific truth about humor, more nearly stated by Hegel perhaps than by any other great philosopher, was, in true Hegelian fashion, obscured and vaporized and rendered a mere vehicle of metaphysical soulful emotions.

CHAPTER VI

THE MECHANICAL THEORY

It was characteristic of science in the later nineteenth century to drop all these vague but significant emotions and go in for an explanation of laughter upon the mere ground of cerebral mechanics. The hint of such an explanation was contained in Léon Dumont's idea of an "intellectual collision" which "translates itself" into these motions of the diaphragm. But the classic and supreme expression of it is Herbert Spencer's essay on "The Physiology of Laughter." Spencer undertook to explain all laughter—or at least all comic laughter, for he sensed the existence of other kinds—in the same manner that you would explain the operation of a pump or siphon. It is simply an overflow, along the most ready and available channels, of nervous energy from a reservoir that has been stored up too full. It occurs when we have prepared our minds for something big and momentous, and there follows something small and inconsiderable. Thus we see an acrobat run down a spring-board and do a somersault over the backs of four horses. It takes some energy to perceive that. A clown follows him with the same earnest gait and gesture, and we gather energy to perceive it again. The clown stops to flick a bit

of dust off the flank of the nigh horse, and all that energy of ours, made suddenly superfluous, floods forth into the nearest available nerve-channels, which happen to innervate these muscles of voice and respiration and facial grimace.

There is no exaggerating the eminence in our history of these few clear pages of Herbert Spencer. They seemed really for the first time to explain how laughter "bursts out, and in what manner it all at once takes possession of our sides, of our mouth, our veins, our look, our eyes. . . ." They authenticated the assertion of Jean Paul that the laughable as an objective thing is "the infinitely little," and they supplied the basic idea for the most thoroughly elaborated treatise on humor and the comic that we have—that of Theodor Lipps.

What Lipps did was to formulate a psychology to correspond with Spencer's physiology of laughter. Spencer had explained why we laugh when we perceive something comic, and Lipps offered upon the same hypothesis to explain why we feel happy. He repeated in other language Spencer's definition of the comic in itself as a "descending incongruity"—an incongruity in perceiving which our attention passes from great things to small. And he fortified this definition by analyzing several examples of the comic—his favorite, for some reason, being that of a tiny house standing near to a great palace and accurately imitating its form, or such a house occurring in a whole row of palaces. We are comically affected by this contrast, he

observed, but by the contrast between a row of palaces and a church or a theatre, although it is equally pronounced, we are not so affected. And if we see a row of little houses and then one great palace, our emotion is wonder and astonishment rather than comic amusement. Thus a "something little" forms always one side of the comic contrast, and it is always the second side, the goal and not the starting-point of our thought or perceptive activity. To ward off superficial objections, Lipps further characterized this psychologically little thing as that which is "for us relatively meaningless," which "possesses little weight," "makes less impression." "A relative nothing," he calls it, and thus comes into verbal accord with the statement of Kant, as well as those of Spencer and Jean Paul.

Before endeavoring to show why such a contrast should produce comic feeling, Lipps is concerned to determine just what the essence of this feeling is. And he begins by throwing out all previous attempts to say what it is, on the ground that they do not recognize its uniqueness. They all try to identify the comic with some other emotion, and Lipps truly and repeatedly asserts that "the feeling of the comic is a feeling of the comic and nothing else." It is not always even a pleasant feeling, according to him, but may assume now more of the character of pleasure and now more of pain. But whether pleasurable or painful the ground-color of it is always a kind of merriment (*Heiterkeit*). For in spite of the customs of speech, says

Lipps, there is not only a merry pleasure, but also a merry pain. And this merriment—or gaiety, or frivolity, as we might have to call it in English—is a feeling appropriate to what is small and of light import. "The feeling of seriousness [*des Ernstes*] is a feeling of greatness or the great, it is a feeling of the strong, the very moving or weighty, the broad, the deep. The feeling of merriment in the aforementioned neutral sense [neutral, that is, in relation to pleasure and pain] is a feeling of smallness or the small; it is a feeling of the superficial, the light, the playing." This feeling, says Lipps, affords "the common moment" in all experiences of the comic.

In order to understand the origin of these two feelings, we must realize that it requires energy to make out of anything that affects our nervous system an object of conscious attention. It is as though our conscious life were but the upper level of a reservoir of psychic, or at least cerebral, processes. To raise the waves of any of these processes high enough to bring them into consciousness is an actual mechanical effort, and the supply of psychic force required for this effort is greater according to the weight, or meaningfulness, or emotional importance of the given process. It is the relation of the supply of this psychic force we have prepared, to the demand that an object of attention actually makes upon us, which gives rise to these opposite feelings of serious and gay. If a great object comes after little preparation, a sudden psychic labor is required of us, and we feel extremely grave; but if

a little object comes after we have prepared for a great one, then our labor is more than done, and we feel like celebrating a holiday. And this may happen, even though we wanted the greater thing, and are somewhat pained at the loss. The *qualitative* contrast pains us, but *quantitatively* we are still the winners, for we have on hand an extra supply of "psychic force," and so even when our laugh is bitter, it is gay.

We can best resist the charm of this too neatly mechanical theory by recalling it to our mind upon some occasion when we are put into a fit of lasting hilarity by an incident so richly comic that we can neither depart from it nor regain any composure of our bodies while it survives. At such times it can only appear quixotic to attempt to separate comic laughter from other seizures of passion, which have their appropriate stimulus and their hereditary mode of behavior. But even if comic laughter were always merely a quick giggle of relief, such as might carry off a bit of energy out of the cerebrum, it could be demonstrated that its causes are too general to be defined as descending incongruities, or as merely quantitative disappointments. It has been demonstrated, in fact, by one of Lipps's critics, with the example of a man's laughter who thinks he hears a cat in the closet, and when he opens the door discovers his aunt. Lipps was compelled to acknowledge that an aunt is both larger and of greater "psychic weight" than a cat, and he avoided the difficulty by saying that "the comic resides in one's expecting for the aunt a worthy situation and finding an un-

worthy." But if we are going to be mechanical, we cannot jump aside in this way from the real sequence of events. The man had "prepared his psychic energy" for raising into consciousness *a cat.* What he raised into consciousness was *his aunt in an unworthy situation*—a weightier thing from every point of view. I suppose there is a joy for all healthy nephews in laying bare an aunt who has been smooching around the closet—a joy not untinctured with poetic humor—but I think it must be conceded that this humor is enriched by the simultaneous collapse of a more trivial expectation. Perhaps it would simplify the problem of weights and measures if the man were to find a cow in the closet. And yet I suppose it might be possible to prove that a cat has some closetarious importance, a kind of abditory or lurk-hole dignity at least, that makes him in that situation the heavier of the two.

It is not easy to disestablish a theory which rests upon so indeterminate a fact as "psychic weight." I believe, however, that the reader who can find humor in a small house occurring in a long row of palaces, will find humor in a large baby occurring in a long row of small ones. And he will have the same difficulty finding humor in a *small baby* that he does in a *large house.* The reason is that the smallness of babies, like the largeness of houses, does not so easily pass the range of our appetites. A tiny house is no house from the standpoint of our disposition toward houses, and a baby cannot be very much enlarged without ceasing to be a baby and becoming a preposterous object.

That is why these opposite quantities are the ones more easily made comic.

If quantitative disappointments as such were the cause of our laughter, we should giggle a little at very slight ones, and roar louder and louder as they grow more extreme. But since playful annoyments are the cause of our laughter, it is natural that we should not even begin to laugh at the quantitative ones, until they grow extreme enough to rob us of the possibility of serious adjustment. It is not possible for one who expected a clown to jump over four horses to adjust his preperceptions to the minute act of attention to a grain of dust upon one of the horses' flanks. That is *too little.* But suppose the clown stands there meticulously dusting invisible grains from that flank, until through and by means of the process of comic laughter we *have* adjusted ourselves to it, and then suddenly draws back and gives the horse a terrible resounding whack—we shall laugh again and with the same comic delight, for that is *too much.*

I remember an acrobatic juggler who, after entertaining his audience for a time in the usual fashion, came down toward the front of the stage in argument with an accomplice in the gallery, who objected to his performance. The argument became so hot that the accomplice began to throw apples at the acrobat, and he, instead of dodging them energetically with his whole body, placed himself exactly in the way of them, ducking his head at the last moment and catching them in his hands behind his back. He thus disappointed us

of the extravagant pleasure of seeing his head cracked with an apple, but presented to us in the same moment a rare exhibition of nimble dexterity. Our laughter was comic and uproarious. He repeated this trick until he could observe that our disappointment was no longer genuine, because we were now expecting the nimble dodge instead of the disaster. Then without the least change of method or expression, he permitted an apple to smash to pieces upon his bald crown. At this we laughed again freshly and with comic uproar. For we had got exactly the satisfaction that we originally desired, and got it in the form of a disappointment. This incident seemed to me useful as a disproof of the derision theory, for it showed that humorous laughter can arise when people are unexpectedly *deprived of derision and presented with admiration,* as well as when they are *deprived of admiration and presented with derision.* But it seemed still more useful as disproving, in the only way that so flexible an idea could be disproven, the assertion of Lipps and Spencer that we laugh only when we arrive at the psychically small after expecting the psychically great, for here the thing expected and the thing arrived at were accurately interchanged, and our laughter was of equal volume in the two cases.

A certain feeling of ease or gaiety doubtless ensues when strenuous mental preparations have been made to perceive something which is trivial when it arrives. And this feeling colors the comic emotion, giving a character of *levity* to such humor as is merely absurd

and meaningless, or consists in offering preposterously little things to our attention. When a clownish acrobat poises himself and draws breath for an enormous leap, and then suddenly turns and saunters off the stage, there is a kind of easing joy mixed in the comedy of our laughter. It is a different mixture from that which arises if he stumbles and bumps his nose against some solid object on the way out. But to make that feeling of ease or levity the definitive essence of all comic experience is to commit exactly the error that Lipps so scornfully attributes to his predecessors. It is to define the comic feeling by saying that it is something else. And Lipps could have demolished his own theory in the same words with which he demolished theirs. "The feeling of the comic is a feeling of the comic *und weiter nichts!*" That sentence contains his real contribution to the science of humor.

CHAPTER VII

LAUGHTER AS LIBERTY

WHILE those philosophers, impressed chiefly by the laughter of disappointment, were developing this distinguished system of mechanics to explain it, another series of philosophers, impressed also by the laughter of satisfaction, had hit upon an equally distinguished and almost as mechanical explanation. Laughter, they said, is the result of a release of the nervous system from some form of tension or constraint. It is a let-go, a playing free of the whole apparatus upon the sudden removal of a purpose or an obstacle.

An association of laughter with the idea of liberty first appeared in Lord Shaftesbury's famous essay on "The Freedom of Wit and Humor" in 1711.

"The natural free spirits of ingenious men," he said, "if imprisoned or controlled, will find out other ways of motion to relieve themselves in their constraint; and whether it be in burlesque, mimicry, or buffoonery, they will be glad at any rate to vent themselves, and be revenged on their constrainers. . . . 'Tis the persecuting spirit has raised the bantering one."

The constraint implied here was external, and for the most part legal and political, but this same idea carried inward, and applied to the workings of our own minds, became one of the most famous theories

of comic laughter. It was Alexander Bain, I believe, who first so applied it.

"The Comic, in fact, starts from the Serious," he said. "The dignified, solemn, and stately attributes of things require in us a certain posture of rigid constraint; and if we are suddenly relieved from this posture, the rebound of hilarity ensues, as in the case of children set free from school. . . . It is always a gratifying deliverence to pass from the severe to the easy side of affairs; and the comic conjunction is one form of this transition."

The idea suggested here has found increasing favor in modern times, and may be discovered along with the dying echoes of Hobbes's theory in almost any text-book of psychology. It was enriched by Charles Renouvier, who added to the moral and emotional deliverance implied in Bain's language, the idea of a deliverance from the constraints of rationality—an idea already hinted at by Schopenhauer. I quote from "La Nouvelle Monadologie":

"One sometimes sees the face of him who laughs marked with incertitude, with astonishment. He seems for a moment to make an effort of attention, in order to find a reasonable meaning in the thought that one offers him. But in presence of the impossibility of sensible interpretation and recognizing that the unreason is voluntary, he feels that it is not the moment to make sense, and releases himself. This release of the reason translates itself physiologically by the laugh. Mentally it is a kind of play. . . .

The reasonable animal, the same as the *risible* animal (so described by the scholastic doctors) in playing the fool, escapes

for a time from the constraints of the rational faculty, and experiences a joy of deliverance in going outside of its law and making nonsense."

This view of comic laughter found a valiant champion in the year 1893, when A. Penjon published his brilliant dogmatic essay on "Laughter and Liberty." And in the year 1894 it received a more judicious indorsement in John Dewey's articles on "The Theory of Emotion." Dewey was not directly concerned with the problem of humor, but by way of illustrating his discussion of emotion and emotional expression in general, he spoke at some length about laughter, which he described as a "sudden relaxation of strain." It marks the end, he said, of a period of suspense or expectancy, "the attainment of a unity." We constrain our nervous energy in much the same way that we hold our breath during a period of expectancy, and in attainment we release it, and laughter is the effect of that release. Humor and all the forms of the comic offer "simply more complex and intellectually loaded differentiations of this general principle."

Dewey was probably not aware of Penjon's attempt to apply this principle to those more complex differentiations. If he had been, he might have felt some doubt of its validity. For Penjon, in his enthusiasm for the idea that laughter is nothing but "the end of a constraint"—or as he names it again more picturesquely "liberty visible"—arrives at some assertions that would do violence to Dewey's very guiding sense of real fact. Even gibes and mockery confess themselves to

be a special kind of spiritual freedom in the course of his essay, and the smile with which one greets a friend is described as "the natural mark of an increased liberty." We cannot but admire the skill and energy with which M. Penjon rides his epigram, but we do not receive a sense of arriving at any assured destination. We observe that a number of brilliant starts are made and that at least one famous and fertile idea was launched by him—the idea that comic speech and behavior is "the sudden eruption of a spontaneity," and that "nature," which is "in a large sense synonymous with liberty," is what breaks through the constraints of civilization in jokes and humorous laughter. It is this idea that now occupies so much attention in the doctrines of Sigmund Freud.

That psychology was tending in this direction before Freud's theories became widely known, however, may be seen in several articles and text-books. Among these a plea for the general acceptance of Penjon's theory, which appeared in the *American Journal of Psychology* for October, 1907, is interesting because it reveals a new tone of voice in which the problem of humorous laughter was beginning to be discussed.

Humor "stands guard at the dividing line between free and mechanized mind, to check mechanization and to preserve and fan the sparks of genius. . . . The humor stimulus gives glimpses of the world of uncertainties, of spontaneities, and of life, and in so doing creates the sense of freedom of which the sense of humor is the obverse side. . . . Perhaps its largest function is to detach us from our world of good and evil, of loss

and gain, and enable us to see it in proper perspective. It frees us from vanity, on the one hand, and from pessimism on the other by keeping us larger than what we do, and greater than what can happen to us."

It is evident in these paragraphs that some of Hegel's wisdom was coming back into this modern theory, and that humorous laughter, from being a mere mechanical by-accident or purely negative condition of release, was beginning again to resemble wisdom and nobility of life itself. We must confess, however, that liberty *is* a purely negative condition, and if taken in any defined scientific sense, does not permit all these positive good things to be deduced from it. The author says at one point in his essay that "the uniqueness of the humor tone is the crux of the matter," and that is true, but it is contradictory to everything else that he says. For liberty, a release from tension, a removal of constraint, an absence of mechanization —however we describe it—does not necessarily possess this unique tone. We do frequently laugh at the end of a period of tension, and if the end comes in certain ways, we laugh humorously, but there are many other things which we do at the end of such a period. We move our chairs, get up and walk about, stretch, sigh, swear, pray, cough, or say "Whew!" or say "Well! Well!" or "Bless my soul!" Dewey himself points out that we release our breath after a period of tension, but he does not offer that as an explanation of breathing, and there is little better reason why laughter, and above all humorous laughter with its unique quality

of feeling, should receive so negative an explanation. Laughter is not a concise and finely determined form of behavior, perhaps, but it is a sufficiently definite semivoluntary act. It is a part of what we do, and not merely something that happens when we have ceased to do anything.

When Dewey says that the smile of an infant is an expression of assent, he has himself profoundly contradicted his explanation of laughter as a kind of mechanical accident. He has placed it where so universal, frequent, and emotional an activity would seem inevitably to belong, among the positive functions or instincts of man, whose ultimate explanation is their utility in life and evolution. Likewise when Penjon is compelled by his theory to declare that in meeting a friend we experience an increase of liberty, he has tacitly acknowledged the failure of his theory. For it was not liberty as a vague word of eulogy for all the positive good things of life, but liberty as "*la fin d'une contrainte*," that had given meaning and scientific cogency to his epigram. Laughter is liberty—yes, it is one of the things that we are most likely to do when we are set free. But it is not what we always do; sometimes we shout. And it is a thing that we do upon other occasions also; we laugh at our chains. Therefore, however happily they may be associated together, and however much a feeling of liberty may sometimes accelerate our laughter and flavor the enjoyment of a joke, liberty is not laughter and cannot fundamentally explain its existence.

CHAPTER VIII

FREUD'S CONTRIBUTION

THE scientific world is generally aware that Sigmund Freud, in addition to his other momentous gifts to our self-knowledge, has made an important contribution to the understanding of wit and humor. But just what that contribution is, nobody seems to know. And there are two good reasons for this. One is that Freud himself has not a clear conception of it, and the other is that he has chosen a method of exposition which would leave his reader in a state of refined doubt and madness, even were his own thoughts the clearest in the world. His method is to coax and allure us with original and apparently fertile ideas continually up to the verge of some point or conclusion, only to dodge away at the last moment, intimating that the matter must remain in suspense until "later on," and then never explicitly to mention it again. There is no reader in existence who could hold all these suspended matters in memory throughout the labor that follows, and we may simply put it down as one more evidence of the wide gulf between theoretic and active knowledge, that one of the greatest students of the human mind should write a book that no human mind can satisfactorily read. With that much by way of "discharging the affect," we may be able to estimate

Freud's ideas justly, and give them a due place in our history.

These ideas really belong to the theory of laughter as liberty, or a release of the mind and nervous system from constraint. Freud brought the support and illumination of his hypothesis of the Unconscious to that theory, confirming in a surprising way the remarks of Bain and Renouvier and John Dewey, and building up a solid platform of fact under Penjon's acrobatic speculations. But owing to his scientific environment, as it seems, rather than to any thorough consideration and choice, he accepted the mechanical theory of Lipps and Spencer as an established science of laughter, and unsuccessfully endeavored to engraft his thoughts upon that theory.

Freud's book is primarily an investigation of wit, or what we have called intellectual jokes, and he traces these jokes to their origin in the world-play and thought-play of children, an activity which he thinks is not humorous, but merely a happy and wanton exercise of the mental faculties. It is a direct *enjoyment of nonsense*, such as Renouvier had declared that the play of a "rational animal" would be. As the child grows up he is compelled by the social standards of rationality, and what we call "good sense," to abandon these forms of amusement, but the impulse to indulge them remains alive in his bosom, and he finds in maturity a very astute way of satisfying it. He seeks out forms of speech which are *from one point of view* nonsense, but which *from another point of view*

mean something. He thus gratifies his love of nonsense, without too much offending his reason and critical judgment. And that is the simplest kind of wit, which Freud designates with the word *Scherz*, and which his English translator has called the "jest." In a jest as so defined we do not derive any pleasure from the *meaning* of what is said; our pleasure lies in its meaninglessness, and the meaning is there only "to guard this pleasure against suppression by our reason."

Freud recalls, as an example of this rudimentary kind of playfulness, the remark of a professor who taught at the University of Göttingen in the sixteenth century.

> "Wishing to enroll a student named Warr in his class, he asked him his age, and upon receiving the reply that the student was thirty years of age, he exclaimed: 'Aha, so I have the honor of seeing the Thirty Years' War!'"

There is a comic quality in this remark, and yet it is not to be described as "wit," according to Freud, because, although it makes sense, the sense has no value. If the man's name had been Johnson, there would have been no purpose in saying "I have the honor of seeing a Thirty year Johnson." Such a statement would *just barely have made sense*—and so also of this statement. But that is all that is required of the formal aspect of a jest. Its value is its nonsense—the sheer folly, in this case, of announcing in the midst of a dignified academic performance "I see the Thirty Years' War!"

In order to place it in the higher species of humor,

which Freud calls "wit," the *sense* of a jest as well as the nonsense must have value. And in such cases our infantile pleasure in the nonsense serves to enhance and magnify the value of the sense. It makes us think more of it than we otherwise should, although still it is not the sense, but the nonsense—the release of our mind from the constraints of reason—that produces witty pleasure, and gives the character of humor to these intellectual jokes.

As an example of wit Freud is very fond of recalling the remark of Heine's character Hirsch-Hyacinth that "I sat next to Solomon Rothschild, who treated me just as if I were an equal, quite famillionaire." The sense that Freud finds in this nonsense is the rather bitter observation that Rothschild "treated him in a familiar way, that is, as far as this can be done by a millionaire." Thus "the jest," or *nonsense made tolerable to reason,* rises to the dignity of "wit," or *nonsense lending its glamour and protection to a sensible statement.*

But nonsense has a still greater career to fulfil, before it ever becomes the cause of hilarious laughter. It has to give release to other and stronger repressed tendencies of our nature than the mere tendency to play—namely, the hostile or aggressive tendency, and the sexual or "obscene" tendency. When the sense which lurks behind the nonsense of a jest is a conscious expression of one or the other of these great unconscious tendencies, "from which nothing that is formed in psychic life can escape for any length of time," then it has

come into its full maturity as a provoker of laughter, and assumed an altogether new importance in the mechanism of our minds. Freud calls these jests which release from the unconscious a major impulse of our nature "tendency wit," as opposed to that "harmless wit" which merely sets free the play-impulse, and at which he says we never laugh very uproariously.

In tendency wit there is still from one point of view a *nonsense* in what is said, and that is the more obvious point of view. And our childish pleasure in this nonsense makes the words acceptable and easy to express, although in reality they are merely a disguise for certain intimate and emotional kinds of *sense*, which without such a disguise we could not, or would not dare to express at all. We might find it difficult, for instance, to acknowledge, or even to know, that there exists in our bodies a rather indiscriminate yearning to commit adultery. But if we were earnestly advising some young man to take a wife, and he should earnestly reply "Whose?" that would give us a pleasure out of all proportion to the proper value of such nonsense. It would not only release us from the temporary constraints of intellectual purpose, but it would set aside the whole structure of restriction upon which our social culture is founded, and inaugurate a moment at least of really barbaric and uproarious liberty. Tendency wit might be defined then, according to Freud, as a kind of nonsense, pleasurable in itself, but so constructed as to furnish a disguise under which a man

hearing it can bear to admit into his own society his own suppressed impulses.

For those who are a little shocked, either in their taste or their sense of reality, by Freud's assertion that the impulses released in this way from the unconscious are only two—the aggressive and the sexual—it will be interesting to know that Freud even declares that these two "may be united under one view-point"—and that of course the view-point of sex. He does not unite them, however, but on the contrary expands and generalizes the one called "aggressive," until it includes much that is remote from the real implication of the word. It includes that form of satire which is an attack upon the unnatural and overpretentious institutions of human culture; it includes jokes told upon oneself, and the jokes which Jewish people delight in at the expense of their own race; and it even includes, as a separate class, jokes which attack neither a person nor an institution, but "the very certainty of our knowledge," and may be called "sceptical jokes."

It is characteristic of that tendency toward amateur and irresponsible generalization which can be detected elsewhere in Freud's writing, that he should erect an entirely distinct kind and class of wit called "sceptical," for no better reason than that he has thought of a good story which awakens in him a pleasurable speculation. If he had thought a little longer he could have erected many other classes of tendency wit besides the hostile and the sexual—as many as there are impulses

unsatisfied in man. Let us hear the story, however. It is about two Jews who met in a railway-station:

"Where are you going?" said one.

"To Cracow," said the other.

"What a liar you are!" said the first. "You want me to believe you're going to Lemburg, and that's why you say you're going to Cracow. But I know very well you're going to Cracow!"

The remoteness of our pleasure in this story from a mood of hostile or obscene aggression against the existence of truth may justify us in taking the rest of Freud's classification somewhat lightly. We may indulge a little scepticism of our own at his expense. When he boldly asserts—as he quite often does—that all of a large number of things may be "united under the view-point" of sex, he may be employing a little Jewish bravado not unlike that of the man who was going to Cracow. He knows very well that we will not believe they can all be united under the view-point of sex, but he is wilful enough to say they all can, in order to get us to believe that most of them can.

This statement about the predominance of sex in our unconscious natures is decidedly a minor point in Freud's book, however, and the manner in which it has been grabbed out and exploited as the essence of his book tends rather to confirm its truth. The essence of his book, as a contribution of something new to the science of humor, is its demonstration that witticisms, whatever their original and more simple nature may be, are peculiarly adapted for releasing suppressed motives from the unconscious, and they are frequently so em-

ployed. Freud was led to realize this fact by the peculiar similarity that he observed between wit and dreams.

A dream when it is interpreted, he says, often seems like a poor attempt at a joke. It shows the same tendency to express two or more things by one, to express a thing by its opposite, by something similar to it, by using ambiguous words, or words that have both a literal and a figurative meaning, by twisting words, or making up new ones, or changing their order in a sentence. Indeed a dream has all the attributes of a joke except its humor. It seems to be something like a joke turned inside out. And Freud tries to explain this by saying that a dream disguises our forbidden thoughts *in order to keep them out of consciousness*, while a joke disguises them *in order to let them in*. In the one case we are trying to avoid the pain of thinking about something that we dread more than we desire it; in the other we are trying to secure the pleasure of something that we desire more than we dread it. Naturally, therefore, dreams are colorless and pointless; their function is negative; their function is *not to make sense*. The function of witticisms is *to make sense*, and, in tendency wit at least, to make sense of a very pleasurable kind. In that way Freud explains both the similarity and the difference between wit and dreams, and so seeks to prove and complete his theory of the relation of wit to the unconscious.

I believe that any one who has read away at Freud's book with patient endurance will agree that this is a

true and not incomplete account of his essential explanation of wit. And yet the reader who takes up his book for the first time will be surprised to find that at no point does he appear to be discussing the ideas here described, or attempting to prove them. He is always apparently occupied with the thesis that in every example of wit, and also in comic perceptions, and in emotional humor, there is a sudden "economy of psychic expenditure," and that this is the source of our pleasure, and the cause of our laugh. For that is the idea which he derived from his friend Theodor Lipps, and which Lipps derived from Herbert Spencer.

It is apparent in the language that Freud himself uses when he is discussing tendency wit, and the relation of wit to dreams, and in many other places, that his own natural conception of the source of our pleasure is "the gratification of tendencies."

"The pleasure in tendency wit," he says, "results from the fact that a tendency whose gratification would otherwise remain unfulfilled is actually gratified. That such gratification is a source of pleasure is self-evident without further discussion."

Here he speaks a language about pleasure which is intelligible and natural to the layman, and which also accords with the best technical attempts to deal with this difficult problem. He speaks the same language again in one of his foot-notes, where he makes a suggestion—which I think is wholly erroneous—about the origin of the laugh.

"According to the best of my knowledge the grimaces and contortions of the corners of the mouth that characterize laughter appear first in the satisfied and satiated nursling when he drowsily

quits the breasts. There it is a correct motion of expression since it bespeaks the determination to take no more nourishment, an 'enough,' so to speak, or rather a 'more than enough.' This primal sense of pleasurable satiation may have furnished the smile, which ever remains the basic phenomenon of laughter."

These statements about our pleasure in "the gratification of a tendency" and about a "sense of pleasurable satiation," are not only in accord with common sense and good science, but they are also in accord with the original tenor of Freud's psychology, which dealt with a "libido" and its adventures in gratification and denial, as the source of all psychic weal or woe. They seem, therefore, to justify us in regarding the too labored idea of an "economy of psychic expenditure," as not only unessential to his theory, but also in some degree alien and opposed to it.

Since we are writing a history, however, as well as a criticism, we must proceed to show how Freud brings his theory of witty pleasure as a *gratification of repressed tendencies,* into accord with the theory that it is a result of *psychic energy suddenly made superfluous,* or as he says *economized.* He does it in a different way for each of the four kinds, or stages, of wit which he has described.

(1) That the pleasure of a child's play with words arises from a kind of psychic economy, he does not really explain at all, but simply asserts it in the following words:

"Play—we shall retain this name—appears in children while they are learning how to use words and connect thoughts; this playing is probably the result of an impulse which urges the

child to exercise its capacities (Groos). During this process it experiences pleasurable effects which originate from the repetition of similarities, the rediscovery of the familiar, sound-associations, etc., which may be explained as an unexpected economy of psychic expenditure. Therefore it surprises no one that these resulting pleasures urge the child to practice playing and impel it to continue without regard for the meaning of words or the connections between sentences. Playing with words and thoughts, motivated by certain pleasures in economy, would thus be the first step to wit."

(2) The jest, we remember, is merely a trick of so arranging this childish play-nonsense that it will also make sense, and thus guarding these original pleasure-sources against the censorship of reason. Granted that play-pleasure is mere economy, therefore, it needs no proof that the pleasure of a jest is of the same sort, and no proof is offered.

(3) With wit, however, even of the "harmless" kind, a very elaborate proof is offered. Indeed almost the first half of Freud's book is an attempt, by analyzing a great series of more or less familiar witticisms, to show that in them all some sort of "condensation" occurs, so that a given amount of verbal or conceptual effort conveys more than its usual amount of meaning. "A compressing or—to be more exact—an economizing tendency controls all these technics."

Freud's translator offers as an example of this tendency the following native witticism:

"A Tale of Two American Generations

Gold Mine
Gold Spoon
Gold Cure"

It is an example which disproves Freud's assertion, so far as I am concerned, for my actual expenditure of psychic force in digging out the meaning condensed in this nonsense was greater than would have been required by a direct and sensible statement, and yet I was not unable to enjoy its wit. In many of Freud's own examples he is to me equally unconvincing, and his whole labor here seems loose and inconsequential, largely because he shifts vaguely back and forth between his original purpose—to show that the technique of wit is the same as that of dreams—and this adventitious one—to show that it is "all a matter of economy."

(4) To prove that economy is the source of our pleasure in "tendency wit" would seem especially difficult, because the very definition of this wit as fulfilling a tendency implies that we enjoy it because of that fulfilment. But here Freud is very ingenious. He tells us that our pleasure does not arise out of the fulfilment of the tendency, but out of the fact that the energy which had been employed in preventing its fulfilment is released. "We observe," he says, "that the economy of psychic expenditure in suppressions and inhibitions seems to be the secret of the pleasurable effect of tendency wit."

If we set this observation over against the one quoted previously that "the pleasure in tendency wit results from the fact that a tendency whose gratification would otherwise remain unfulfilled is gratified," we have at once a sample of the confusion in Freud's book and an indication of the source of it. He is trying to make a theory of laughter as the liberation of

impulse fit into the forms of the theory that laughter is an overflow of energy.

In his discussion of what he calls humor Freud simply reproduces one of the clear ideas of his predecessor. It will be remembered that in Lipps's theory the "small" thing at which we laugh is often small only in the sense of being "less impressive" than the one for which we had prepared ourselves. It is a thing of *less emotional importance*. And to laughable things of this kind Freud gives the name of "humor." The pleasure in humor, he says, arises from an "economy of expenditure in feeling." It may be the feeling of sympathy, of anger, pain, compassion, or indeed any emotion whatever, with which we might be prepared to greet an experience. But when the experience arrives, if we discover that this prepared feeling was excessive or uncalled for, then our souls are relieved at the sudden saving of passion, and laugh with that peculiar parsimonious pleasure which Freud attributes to them. The fact that these souls also laugh hilariously at the forms of wit which permit the *sudden expenditure* of these same passions does not trouble the author, and need not trouble the reader either, if he will remember that all this is simply a rescript of Lipps's and Spencer's idea of the "descending incongruity," and that Freud's real contribution to the science of humor has nothing whatever to do with it.

Freud invented the hypothesis of the unconscious, and of the repression of primitive and infantile motives

into the unconscious, and he discovered that dreams and neurotic and psychotic symptoms, and many little accidents of speech and action in every-day life, are the result of an attempt of these motives to express themselves in spite of the force that represses them. In myth and poetry and the development of language he also discovered signs of these unconscious motives. And he discovered them in certain hilarious forms of wit, where they play so great a part that it will be impossible ever to explain wit, or to explain humorous laughter in general, without at some point employing Freud's hypothesis of the unconscious. But Freud himself did not explain wit, nor humorous laughter, and it will only delay and hinder the explanation of them if the great respect we have for his genius leads us to think that he did.

Freud's long labor of pseudo-empirical proof that witticisms have the same technique as dreams is not important, for it is clear from his definition of them that dreams and witticisms will both employ *any and every technique* by which a given set of words or ideas can make formal nonsense, and yet imply or symbolize something intelligible. The important thing is his definition, his statement that dreams and tendency wit are practically the same thing, and that dreams lack pleasantness merely because they are employed to keep ideas out of consciousness instead of to bring them in. I think there is one other difference between dreams and the jokes which release an impulse from the unconscious—namely, that jokes, besides being pleas-

ant, give rise to a comic emotion, and that dreams, *even when they are interpreted and the forbidden idea thus brought into consciousness,* do not give rise to such an emotion. And that raises, of course, the fundamental objection to Freud's theory of wit. He does not at any point explain, or even apparently perceive, the existence of this quality of feeling. He says that the original pleasure which children have in nonsense is not a comic or humorous pleasure, and yet elsewhere he says that it *is* a pleasure derived from "economy." Why should this economy-pleasure be without humor when it is enjoyed in a simple manner by children, and yet acquire a humorous quality when it is come back to by adults, who only bring with them a slightly more complicated kind of economy? That is what Freud's elaboration of Lipps's theory fails altogether to explain.

And if we drop away the Lippsian apparatus, and consider Freud's theory in its own simplicity, there is still the same failure. He is compelled, in his search for the original simple experience from which witty values are derived, to postulate a pure "pleasure in nonsense." And nonsense, for one whose interest is engaged upon a pursuit of meaning, is just the same as nothing at all. It is intellectual nothing. Therefore Freud is not here in essential disagreement with Kant. But for Freud this nothing does not acquire a comic value until it is combined with something. Children are without humor, according to him, and nonsense is not "funny" until it also makes sense. And yet why it is funny then, he never attempts to explain.

He could not explain it upon the assumptions he has made, any more than he can explain why dreams are not funny when they are interpreted. But the whole difficulty is resolved at once if we acknowledge that children have a more lively though crude sense of humor than we have, and that their pleasure in nonsense is the pure evidence of this trait. As they become more serious, more critical, purposive, self-conscious, this play-instinct is less responsive, and in mature life positive meanings are brought in, not to "protect" the humorous pleasure against "the censorship of reason," but to reinforce and flavor it to the adult taste with the satisfaction of a more serious interest. That, I think, is the truth which Freud gropes after in the confusion of these pages. His whole system of psychology is at fault in that it does not recognize the original variety of the instincts, nor explain the different qualities of emotion. It deals only with pleasure and pain. Naturally, the same failing makes inadequate his explanation of wit.

CHAPTER IX

THE DISCOVERY OF MERRY LAUGHTER

We have seen that in the Dark Ages men were familiar with the connection between laughter and states of joy or satisfaction. Lactantius even associates laughter more precisely with satisfactions of the social instinct, asserting that animals as well as men are endowed with this faculty and express their "mutual love and indulgence" with "a kind of smile." It was only after the Revival of too much Learning that this obvious truth disappeared out of literature, and all the philosophers began to identify laughter with comic enjoyment. They all followed in the footsteps of Aristotle, until Charles Darwin with his gift of pure observation set out to make a science of the emotional expressions of men and animals. He rediscovered the obvious truth that men laugh when they are happy, and laid a new basis for the understanding of this whole subject.

"Laughter," said Darwin, "seems primarily to be the expression of mere joy or happiness. We clearly see this in children at play, who are almost incessantly laughing. With young persons past childhood, when they are in high spirits, there is always much meaningless laughter. The laughter of the gods is described by Homer as 'the exuberance of their celestial joy after their daily banquet.' A man smiles—and smiling, as we

shall see, graduates into laughter—at meeting an old friend in the street, as he does at any trifling pleasure, such as smelling a sweet perfume. Laura Bridgman, from her blindness and deafness, could not have acquired any expression through imitation, yet when a letter from a beloved friend was communicated to her by gesture-language, she 'laughed and clapped her hands, and the color mounted to her cheeks.' On other occasions she has been seen to stamp for joy. Idiots and imbecile persons likewise afford good evidence that laughter or smiling primarily expresses mere happiness or joy."

Darwin does not, of course, fail to observe that there exists another kind of laughter—a laughter at the ludicrous—and he is contented with Hobbes's account of it. But he rightly perceives this to be a secondary thing. Laughter is for him primarily, and in the most general sense, an expression of human pleasure and satisfaction. "A graduated series," he says, "can be followed from violent to moderate laughter, to a broad smile, to a gentle smile, and to the expression of mere cheerfulness."

Now the prevailing way in which Darwin seeks to explain emotional expressions is this: he shows that these expressions are survivals or surviving remnants of complete acts which were useful to the species at some point in its earlier history. The attitude of indignation, for instance, is what remains of a preparation for battle; the sneer is an uncovering of the canine tooth for action; the upraised eyebrows and wide opening of the mouth and eyes in fear are an effort "to see as quickly as possible all around us, and to hear dis-

tinctly whatever sound may reach our ears." In ways similar to this all the "emotional expressions" were explained by Darwin. And his explanations have been authenticated, and raised almost to the height of certainty, by our modern understanding of the relation between acts and emotions. For we see now that those acts or beginning of acts which he described, are the primary and essential thing, and that emotions are but the interior quality which belongs to them. We no longer say that the attitude of alertness and a preparation for flight "expresses the emotion" of fear. We say that fear is a feeling which attends this attitude and those preparations—a feeling which is perhaps more intense the more we inhibit them, or fail to carry them out into overt action. We say that anger is our feeling of the instinctive attitude of pugnacity. In this way we verify but reinterpret all of Darwin's careful observations.

Therefore it is very significant that when he arrived at laughter, Darwin was not able to apply his mode of explanation at all. He was at a complete loss to discover any useful instinctive activity, which occurred at moments of special satisfaction, and would account for the innervation of all the various muscles employed in smiles and laughter. He simply asserted his belief in the possibility of such an explanation.

"Although we can hardly account for the shape of the mouth during laughter, which leads to wrinkles being formed beneath the eyes, nor for the peculiar reiterated sound of laughter, nor for the quivering of the jaws, nevertheless we may infer that all

these effects are due to some common cause. For they are all characteristic and expressive of a pleased state of mind in various kinds of monkeys."

It was at this point that a true beginning for the solution of the problem of laughter remained to be found. We had to discover what instinct it is, whose functioning is colored with an emotion almost like happiness or pleasure itself, and whose characteristic expression is an agreeable diverse activity of the countenance and of the vocal organs. And to state the problem in that way was almost to make the reply that it is the gregarious or social instinct, the instinct which finds its stimulus in mere companionship or friendly meeting, and its characteristic satisfaction in seeing the smiling laughter in the eyes of others and hearing them respond. Laughter differs from the other expressions in that it is not the mere suggestive relic of an act. It is an act—a fulfilment in its own proper degree of the social instinct. To exchange a smile is to do something, and short of kissing or devouring one another, nothing more with these particular muscles can very well be done. But with that slight difference laughter is susceptible of the same explanation as the other forms of emotional expression.

Darwin himself, it seems, was almost on the point of naming the social or gregarious instinct, and reaching this explanation of how laughter came to be employed as an expression of satisfaction in general.

" We can see in a vague manner," he said, " how the utterance of sounds of some kind would naturally become associated with

a pleasurable state of mind; for throughout a large part of the animal kingdom vocal or instrumental sounds are employed either as a call or as a charm by one sex for the other. They are also employed as the means for a joyful meeting between the parents and their offspring, and between the attached members of the same social community."

These words of the great biologist seem to put the origin of laughter in its true place, and we may well distrust any theory of humor—no matter how mechanical or neuro-dynamic or psycho-pathological it may be—which does not find itself in accord with them.

CHAPTER X

CONFLICT-MIXTURE THEORIES

As the laughter of satisfaction and the laughter of disappointment have both had their champions in modern philosophy, so has the laughter that arises in a combination of satisfaction with disappointment. A great many philosophers, impressed by the doubleness of mature jokes, have tried to define humor in general as a "contrast," or "conflict," or "mixture" of desirable with undesirable qualities. The first one to revive in our modern world this old opinion of Plato—the first, and I am inclined to add the best—was that physician to the king of France, L. Joubert, the author of the "Traité du ris." Written in the century before Descartes, and yet conceived entirely in the spirit of physiological psychology, this little book deserves a place among the classics of the science. Doctor Joubert tells us, in the first place, that the faculty of comic laughter is not located in the brain, but "sits in the heart with the other passions," and if our own theory is correct, that is the most sensible statement that the whole literature of the subject affords. Doctor Joubert is also wise enough to know—what most of those who followed him found it necessary to forget—that any true science of humor must carry with it the explanation of our pleasure in tickling; and he is clearly

aware of the inseparable connection between humor and that light way of taking things which we describe as play.

The "Traité du ris" accepts, as we have already observed, an Aristotelian account of the ludicrous object. It is always an ugly or unseemly object. But our derisive feeling about this object, according to Doctor Joubert, instead of being altogether happy, is invariably mixed with pain, and this mixture is what causes the peculiar phenomenon called laughter.

"When an object at once pleasant with drollery and sad with ugliness presents itself the heart is stirred very quickly and unevenly, because it wishes to make at the same time two contrary movements, the one of joy and the other of sorrow. Each one is short, through being suddenly interrupted by its opposite which obstructs the path: at the same time the dilation surpasses the contraction, as in the ridiculous there is always more pleasure than pain."

The doctor further assures us, upon the basis of certain authentic anatomical investigations, that the human heart, in distinction from that of the animal, is attached to the diaphragm, and thus it follows by a simple mechanical necessity that men shake their diaphragms when they perceive a ridiculous object, while animals do not. That they do the same thing when they are tickled is subject to a similar explanation, for tickling likewise arouses in our heart an oscillating combination of pleasure with pain.

"The strange touch brings some pain and annoyment to the parts unaccustomed to it, but being light it causes some kind of

false pleasure, namely, that it does not truly offend, and that nature enjoys diversity."

Granted the perfect identity of our heart and its motions with our experiences of passion, and I see but one difficulty in Doctor Joubert's explanation of laughter. That is the fact that, both in tickling and in our perception of the comic, this organ is observed to dilate *more than* it contracts.

'The joy which we experience," he says, "knowing that there is nothing to weep over (except in false appearance), has more force upon the heart than has the light sorrow . . . for it is necessary to laughter that the pleasure exceed the sadness."

I do not see quite why this should be necessary upon the physiological side, nor why it should be true upon the psychological. If laughter is to be explained as the result of a rhythmic alternation between two opposite feelings, I do not see how we can account for the fact that one of these feelings wholly prevails over the other. And I suspect the doctor himself of a little uneasiness upon this point, for he is careful in one chapter to explain that we take a special pleasure in the mixture of pleasure and pain, because they each compel the other to be moderate, and so eliminate the danger of our either laughing or crying ourselves to death!

It seems likely that Descartes was familiar with Joubert's book, and that his own definition of humor as "a species of joy mixed with hate," and his more simple explanation of the laugh, was a modification of what he had read there. Aside from that, however,

this early attempt at a conflict-mixture theory combined with a physiology of laughter, never caught the interest of men, and we find the theory arising again in a purely psychological form in the eighteenth century among the followers of Christian Wolff. Moses Mendelssohn, in his "Philosophische Schriften," says that laughter is not a sure sign of pleasure, but that it is "grounded rather, as well as weeping, in a contrast between perfection and imperfection. Only this contrast must be of no weight and not come home to us too strongly, if it is to be laughable." . . .

"Every lack of harmony between means and end, cause and effect, between the character of a man and his conduct, between thoughts and the manner of their expression, above all, every contrast of the great, venerable, pompous, and significant, with the valueless, contemptible and little, whose consequences put us in no embarrassment, is laughable."

Lessing accepted this account of the matter, and gave it literary pre-eminence by improving it a little in his "Laocoon":

"The ridiculous," he said, "requires a contrast between perfections and imperfections. This is the explanation of my friend, to which I would add that this contrast must not be too sharp and decided, but that the opposites must be such as admit of being blended into each other."

The emotional content of this idea was exploited to the full by the priests of the romantic movement in German literature.

"Humor," they said, "is the kiss which joy and sorrow give each other; it has for its device a smiling tear, it has the head-

dress of a Folly adorned with crepe, while shod with the tragic sandal and the comic sock; it is also the electric spark which plays between the two poles of the contrary words, sentimentality and raillery; and we know finally that Joy and Grief, meeting in the nocturnal forest, loved without recognizing each other, and there was born to them a son, who was Humor."

It would seem that this theory of the conflict-mixture was peculiarly adapted to the trends of German speculation, for Goethe also described the laughable as a contrast—"a moral contrast," he said, "which is brought into unity for the mind in a harmless fashion." And Novalis defined it as "a mixture which comes to nothing." Jean Paul, as we remember, set out with the assertion that this mixture is always of the sublime with the trivial, but he described what he called "wit" more generously as "the disguised priest who marries all couples." To this Theodor Vischer added that he prefers to marry those whose relations do not approve of the match. For to Vischer the idea of contrast was not enough; there must be a contradiction. The two members must actively antagonize, and yet ultimately assimilate each other, resolving their differences, Hegelwise, in the formation of a third which comprises them both. And this contradiction, fully comprehended, is nothing less than "a contradiction of self-consciousness with itself." For when we laugh at the errors of others, said Vischer—borrowing again the ideas of Jean Paul —it is only because we lend or impute to them our own insight, and thus they appear as "conscious of their error and yet at the same moment erring, or as conscious and unconscious at the same time."

Hegel himself, as we have seen, was wiser than his disciples, for he did not pretend that all laughable things contain a contrast—but he too seemed to be aware that something of objective importance is at times implied by the apparently subjective caprice of the joker. Schopenhauer also perceived the doubleness of the more excellent kinds of jokes, and called them "humor" in opposition to the other forms of the comic. In humor, he said, there is a "concealed seriousness." And even Lipps after frequently asserting that the small and ridiculous side of the comic contrast is "a relative nothing," was constrained to add that in the best kinds of the comic, which he too called "humor," this relative nothing turns out to be something after all.

It appears, according to Lipps, that when we are prepared for a sublime thing and encounter a little one, not all of our energy runs off in laughter, but a "psychic damming" occurs, which leaves this energy all the more ready to invest with value a really sublime thing, supposing that one turns up. And we are moved, too, by the presence of this energy to look back over the matter, and see if after all there is not some truth in the pretense of sublimity that has been offered. And supposing we find that there is, then how much more enjoyable and lovable is that sublimity than if our energy had not just been dammed up for the purpose of appreciating it!

"The mission of humor is to make the sublime appear lovable, while on the other hand its mission is to seek out the sublime in the concealed, in narrowness and oppression, in the ill-con-

sidered and disdained, in every kind of smallness and lowliness. . . . Sublimity in the comic defines the essence of humor."

With this idea of "psychic damming" Lipps is still trying to answer the question that troubled the author of the "Traité du ris"—the question why the mixture of a negative with a positive should increase the value of the positive. And this same question has troubled every one of those Germans, both metaphysicians and scientists, who have earnestly attempted to explain the comic as a conflicting mixture of two elements.

Solger tried to solve it by declaring that the comic conflict, which for him is one between "reality and the idea," has a kind of "restfulness" in the perception that the Idea is everywhere present, and so "even in our temporal being we live ever in the beautiful." Another æsthetician, August Wilhelm Bohtz, declared that the artist enters into this conflict in order by means of the negation to ennoble and give body to his affirmative ideal, which else were a "mere empty abstraction." Carrière confessed that the negation would shock and bewilder us if it persisted, but explained our liking to have it arise and then give way to an affirmation, by saying that the experience "cheers us with the assurance that only the Good, the Beautiful and True are also the Enduring and the Real." Lotze, as we have seen, acknowledged that the "Idea" at which a joke arrives is not the same one it was looking for—there is both failure and success—and he explained our liking this combination better than a mere success,

by saying that it proves the world to be a reasonable harmony.

"Only in this happy contemplation of the indestructibility of the universal for-each-other-ness of things can I find the charm of the absolute comic."

Julius Bahnsen took an opposite view of the universal for-each-other-ness. A tragic self-contradiction, he declared, in the ultimate and only law of life, but humor lifts up this contradiction into an intellectual sphere, where it can be contemplated with æsthetic freedom and so enjoyed in spite of itself. A freeing of the soul from interest in either side of the contrast, according to his view, is what gives this contrast a value greater than that of either of its members.

In all these various ways the philosophers of the conflict-mixture theory have tried to extricate themselves from the difficulty of finding too much joy on their hands in a joke. And we might sum them all up by saying that each one attributed this joy to the enthusiasm of mankind for the proof of his particular philosophy.

The scientists who have endeavored to explain humor as a conflicting mixture have found themselves in the same difficulty, and they have not had the same success in getting out of it. The most elaborate of them is Doctor Ewald Hecker, who is generally considered the inventor of the idea that comic feeling consists of "a rapid oscillation back and forth between pleasure and pain." We can hardly deny the full credit for

this invention to the French doctor, but we must confess that Hecker made some improvements upon Joubert's physiology. Hecker's contemporaries had proven with experiments upon animals that a stimulus of the peripheral nerve-endings produces, through the action of the sympathetic nervous system, a contraction of the blood-vessels and consequent lowering of blood-pressure throughout the body. He observed in men when they are tickled a dilation of the pupils of the eyes, which also, he said, indicates a stimulation of the sympathetic nerves. And from these two facts he inferred that a lowering of the blood-pressure in the brain is what innervates the muscles of the diaphragm which cause laughter, and that the function of laughter in tickling is to compensate for that dangerous brain-condition by narrowing the thoracic cavity, submitting the heart and lungs and greater blood-vessels to a strong pressure, and so increasing the force of the circulation.

Being satisfied that this was the true explanation of tickling, Hecker turned to the problem of the comic. And he defined the comic as the simultaneous stimulation from one source, of two feeling-qualities, pleasure and pain, of approximately equal strength. There results from their equality of strength an oscillation of the attention back and forth between these two feelings, and that oscillation has the character of an "intermittent joyful surprise." A single joyful surprise, Hecker declares, causes us to turn pale for a moment, not only in our faces, but all over our bodies, and this

indicates a stimulation of the sympathetic nerves similar to that which is caused by a peripheral contact. An intermittent joyful surprise would naturally therefore cause an intermittent stimulation of the sympathetic nerves, and thus set in motion the same adjustive apparatus that is set in motion by tickling.

All of Hecker's admirable physiology rather goes to pieces when we remember that tickling is a very peculiar form of peripheral stimulation, and that laughter follows it only in certain moods and conditions. But his psychology remains significant—and particularly the skilful manner in which he passes from the idea of a conflict between two incombinable feelings "of equal strength," one pleasant and the other unpleasant, to the idea of an *intermittent pleasure*. He puts his reliance here upon the analogy between this conflict of feelings and our way of perceiving a variation between light and dark.

"In that rapid alternation of fields of vision which we call a *Glanz*," he says, "the clear light becomes to a certain extent more strongly emphasized, and in exactly the same way in the rapid alternation of feelings which forms the comic, the pleasant feelings prove mainly effective, and we can for the purpose of examining the physiological effect of the comic, so far ignore the unpleasant feeling—which must never rise to the point of psychic pain—that we may regard the comic as an intermittent, rhythmically interrupted, joyful excitation of feeling."

That this is a frail analogy upon which to build so elaborate a doctrine as Hecker's physiology of laughter is obvious enough. Light is an effective stimulus, and

dark is rather the absence of it, but the *equal strength* of the two feeling-qualities in the comic—preventing either one of them from gaining the mastery—had been the essence of Hecker's assumption. He is in exactly the same difficulty, therefore, with Doctor Joubert, and with every other scientist or philosopher who has ever attempted to define humor as a conflict-mixture. His definition rules out that very surplus of pleasure which it is supposed to explain.

In spite of this too evident failing, however, Hecker's general account of humor has held its own in German psychology. It determined the opinions both of Kraepelin and of Wundt. And I believe the reason for this is that Hecker did come nearer than any other psychologist to formulating a true definition of the point of a joke. "The simultaneousness of the birth of the two feelings," he said, "constitutes the so-called point, without which the comic effect even of a joke or an anecdote is lost."

Kraepelin did not substantially improve upon Hecker's psychology of the comic, but only attempted again to locate the source of this passion in the brain. It is always an "unexpected intellectual contrast," according to him, which gives rise to this conflict of feelings, "in which finally one's pleasure over the object in question gains a greater influence upon his mood than his displeasure arising from the same source." And Wundt seems to have followed Kraepelin in this judgment. In the fourth edition of his "Grundzüge der Physiologischen Psychologie," he inserted the fol-

lowing statement, which may be regarded as the official deliverance of German psychology upon the subject of humor:

> "In the comic the separate ideas which enter into a totality of perception or of thought are partly harmonious and partly contradictory either to each other or to the manner in which they are united. Thus arises an oscillation of feelings, in which, however, the positive side, the pleasure, not only prevails, but gains the mastery in a particularly strong way, because it is like all feelings elevated through the immediate contrast."

With all respect to the official psychology, we may dismiss this "oscillation of feelings" as an interesting myth. But the fact remains—and it seems to have been the special German contribution to insist upon it—that in the adult and artistic forms of humor an apparent combination of a source of pain with a source of pleasure produces a more pleasant feeling than would arise from the pleasure-source alone. Obviously it is no explanation of this, simply to assert that the pleasure "prevails," and then becomes increased through its contrast with the pain. For in order to make it plausible that the one does not merely crowd the other out of consciousness, it is necessary to assume a certain equilibrium between them, and granted such an equilibrium, there is nothing in any scientific conception of these affections to explain why the pleasure and not the pain should be elevated through contrast. We find then, in this ultimate dictum of the nineteenth-century psychology, the same unanswered question that troubled Doctor Joubert in the days before Bacon, the

same question, indeed, that Plato first failed to answer: Why does an apparent combination of a pain-source with a source of pleasure produce a peculiar pleasure? It can be answered by observing that the apparent pain-source alone, when our attitude is playful, is in reality the source of an emotional interest that is pleasant, being greeted with a tendency to laughter by an elementary instinct which our language has already discerned and described as the sense of humor.

CHAPTER XI

HUMOR AS INSTINCT

A FORM of knowledge that has developed all too quietly in this modern world, considering its vivid importance, is the science of human behavior resting upon the idea of hereditary instincts. I cannot explain all that is implied in my theory of humor without some recollection of the outlines of that science. Just as our understanding of chemistry was set forward into a new era by the discovery that the material world is made out of a limited number of elements, and by the gradual identification of these elements, so our understanding of morals, or education, has been set forward by the discovery and identification of those primary instincts out of which all human motives and emotions are compounded. It was Robert Boyle who conceived the idea of irreducible elements in matter, and it was his contemporary, Malebranche, who made the first significant attempt to isolate and define certain "inclinations or natural motions of the mind." The speculations of Malebranche were not decisive, because, like Boyle, he lacked any definite standards by which to distinguish elements from their compounds. But his guesses were not substantially improved upon until our own time, when William McDougall, in his

"Social Psychology," did propose tests by which instincts that are innate and universal can be distinguished from the more complex and fragile conditions of feeling and impulse which develop in the passage of a life.

McDougall defined an instinct, in accordance with the general scientific usage, as "An inherited or innate psycho-physical disposition which determines its possessor to perceive, and to pay attention to, objects of a certain class, to experience an emotional excitement of a particular quality upon perceiving such an object, and to act in regard to it in a particular manner, or, at least, to experience an impulse to such action." He proposed to identify these instincts, first, by the unique and irreducible quality of the emotional excitement; second, by their occurrence not only in man but also in the higher animals; and third, by their occasional morbid exaggeration in human beings who seem otherwise perfectly sane and healthy—for it would seem, he said, "that each instinctive disposition, being a relatively independent functional unit in the constitution of the mind, is capable of morbid hypertrophy or of becoming abnormally excitable, independently of the rest of the mental dispositions and functions."

The principal instincts whose existence McDougall believed he had ascertained in this manner, and the corresponding primary emotions so far as these have been identified with a name, were these:

1. Flight.....*fear.*
2. Repulsion.....*disgust.*

3. Curiosity.....*wonder.*
4. Pugnacity.....*anger.*
5. Self-abasement.....*subjection.*
6. Self-display.....*elation.*
7. Parental instinct.....*tender emotion.*
8. Sexual instinct.
9. Gregariousness.
10. Acquisition.
11. Construction.

These specific instincts, supplemented by certain "general innate tendencies"—sympathy, suggestibility, imitation, play, rivalry—and by the law of habit, are supposed to comprise all the elements that enter into the complex of human motivation. They supply the material, according to McDougall, for explaining our conduct and our emotions. His lists have been altered, of course, and his account of the causes of action complicated somewhat by the contributions of other psychologists.[1] But it will hardly be denied that there is a basic distinction such as he described between the emotion of fear, for instance, and that of *reproach*, which he says arises from a combination of *anger* with *tender emotion*, or *scorn* which seems to be almost an accurate name for *disgusted anger*.

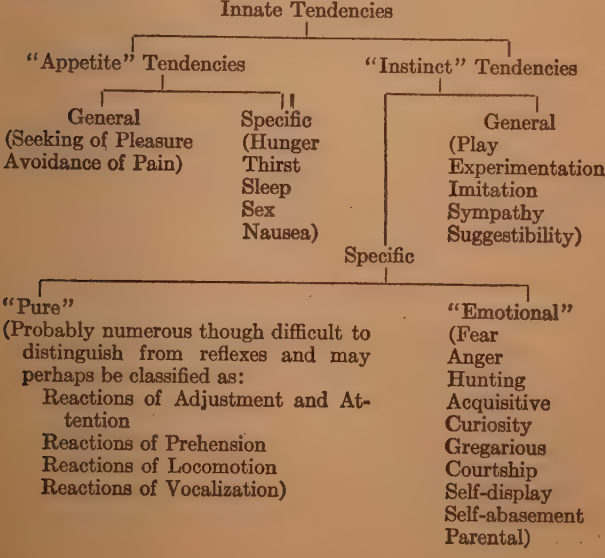
The position that I have taken in this book is that humor is an element. The sense of humor is a primary instinct of our nature, functioning originally only in the state of play, and related not remotely in its devel-

[1] As an example of the present complication of these theories, and to suggest the free play of opinion about them, I give the

opment to that gregarious instinct of which smiles and smiling laughter appear to be an inherent part.

That humorous laughter belongs among the hereditary instincts is indicated by the fact that it appears so early and so spontaneously. We never have to teach children when to laugh; we have to teach them when not to laugh. And if some little argument is required to show them the superiority of clever jokes over crude humor, that is because their gift of laughter is lustier than ours, and they are not so agile in perception and the apprehension of meanings. Only an instinctively humorous creature could, without warn-

following table from a recent excellent volume by James Drever, called "Instinct in Man":



ing or instruction, enjoy seeing a trusted countenance turn suddenly into a grinning ape or gargoyle, and laugh instead of crying out in pain. And yet this humor of the "comic masque," which Aristotle cited as the type of mature comedy, is the first thing we rely upon when a baby is by some relentless destiny committed to our care and entertainment. We rely upon his having so keen a lust for the absurd and ludicrous in play that we need only by laughing a little ourselves to intimate that we are not to be taken seriously, and then contrive any very negative programme of shocks and disappointments—things which would clearly irritate if they did not in their own nature satisfy the intense interest he gives them.

"As children only do we laugh," said Balzac, "and when we travel onward laughter sinks down and dies out like the light of the oil-lit lamp." It sinks down and dies out, and we have to revive it then, and make it flare up with little extra breaths of hidden meaning, and little victories and hostilities and exposures of the flesh, that give point to our droll stories. And if we are proud of these momentary accomplishments, we can hardly look back with scorn upon the days when they were unnecessary. We can, at most, permit ourselves to believe that if age inhibits the free flow of this play-instinct, that inhibition increases our inward feeling of it, and the positive thing toward which we do release our laughter is a little more suffused with humorous emotion.

A further indication that humorous laughter be-

longs among the instinctive emotions of mankind is the fact that it can be communicated from one to another through sympathy. Primitive and fundamental sympathy is an adjustment of our nervous systems by virtue of which we experience an impulse and emotion, not only upon perceiving its appropriate object, but also upon perceiving its characteristic expression and activity in others of our kind. Thus we experience fear when we see people frightened, tender emotion when we see them tender. It seems that every one of the primary instincts is so capable of sympathetic induction. And there is no one of them, unless it be the very condition of sociability itself, which surpasses the sense of humor in this characteristic. I have been very careful to observe that when I hear or see a group of people laughing heartily at some funny tale or incident, although I have not heard or seen the thing at which they laugh, my own response is not only laughter but humorous emotion. And this fact completely refutes the theory of Lipps and Spencer, that humorous laughter is a mechanical result of the passage of attention over a defined series of objects or ideas. It refutes also the theory that such laughter is a mere sign of release, for no matter what one's own condition when he notices that others are enjoying a joke—whether he is tense with enterprise or some attempt at propriety, or whether he is relaxed and perhaps half asleep in a railroad berth—that subtle and incomparable enjoyment steals through him just the same. Humorous laughter is *infectious*—and that alone is

sufficient to establish it among the other instinctive adjustments of mankind to his environment.

And this infection can be conveyed, not only by the process properly called sympathy, but also by the allied process of suggestion. Humor depends, indeed, more than any other quality strived after in art or conversation, upon the existence of a favorable atmosphere. The books which tickled us out of our senses when we thought they were funny, taste as flat as lime-water when somebody points out that they are not. And if we are competently assured that a great comical entertainment is in progress, it matters little what antique fribble and monkey-shine is gone through with. No reputation is more secure, once it is established, than that of the national humorist or comedian. The mere report that one of these great men will appear, sets in action the machinery for enjoying his jokes, however poor they may be. Our sense of humor is *subject to stampede*—and that too places it in the same general class with fear and anger.

That it stands parallel with these instincts as a primary element in our emotional life is proven in the first place by the perfect uniqueness of the humorous emotion. None of the other instincts, not even these two, have a feeling-quality that is less possible to analyze, or reduce through examination, into more simple components. We remember how Lipps refuted the theories of his predecessors with the statement that "The feeling of the comic is a feeling of the comic and nothing else," and how it seemed possible to refute the

theory of Lipps with the same statement. This would not have been possible if the feeling we were discussing had been something like *reproach*, or *gratitude*, or *reverence*. And the importance of Lipps's statement is that it separates the comic from such feelings, and brings it successfully past the first of McDougall's three tests of the elementary-instinctive.

As to his second test—the occurrence of the same instinct in the higher animals—we have here only a very ancient doubt. The scholastic and literary opinion of mankind has been that laughter, and more especially humorous laughter, is a distinguishing attribute of men and gods. Aristotle, Rabelais, Voltaire, Balzac, Bacon, Milton, Hazlitt, Lamennais, Schopenhauer, Bergson—the list is long of those distinguished humans who have flattered their species with this attribution. But the simple and childlike judgment of the race is entirely upon the other side. Professor G. Stanley Hall found among all the seven hundred responses to his questionnaire about laughter, both from adults and children, "the almost unanimous opinion that animals laugh." And it happens that this popular opinion has received more support from trained scientific observers than the classic tradition. Darwin in "The Descent of Man" said that "Dogs show what may be fairly called a sense of humor, as distinct from mere play," and his statement was supported and illustrated by G. J. Romanes. Léon Dumont said that "In playing with a young dog, when we make the gesture of seizing him by one ear and really seize him by the other, we

are persuaded that we awaken in his consciousness the same phenomena which in man express themselves by laughter." James Sully is convinced that both dogs and certain kinds of monkeys have the germ of our sense of the ludicrous, although he does not clearly distinguish this from the more general sense of fun. And C. Lloyd Morgan, in his "Animal Life and Intelligence," quotes both Darwin and Romanes, and adds a further example from his own observations of the apparent humor of dogs, although he is too cautious to assert that dogs actually experience such a feeling.

His caution is but the symptom of a general change of temper in comparative psychology. It is no longer the fashion to imagine what animals have in their consciousness; we try to content ourselves with describing how they behave. Darwin assures us that monkeys make a noise and a motion somewhat like human laughter when they are tickled, and any one who plays with children and with dogs can observe that many of the simple tricks and trippings which give comic amusement to children are welcomed by dogs, and excite them so that instead of going away they dance about as though asking for more of the same experience. We can say at least that when a playing dog "gets the worst of it," he "takes it in good part." And therefore if our account of the humorous instinct is correct, we can assert that its rudiments do exist in dogs—as no doubt in a few other complex and playful animals. But we cannot very well employ that asser-

tion in proof that our account is correct. We can only observe that there is no evidence here to oppose it.

It happens, however, that we can well dispense with this particular point of proof. For our most formidable opponents are those who would explain humor as a manifestation of some universal property of neural and cerebral activity—the state of release, of overflow, of economy—and for the confirmation of their theories it is essential that all fairly advanced animals should make the same or a similar manifestation. But for us it is in a peculiar way unessential, because if the sense of humor is instinctive, and its biological value and history such as we have said, this instinct would surely be one of the latest to evolve. It would have no value except as other instincts began to be inadequate, and life became so various and experimental as to demand a long period of practice in play. It would be an equipment only of complex, alert, and delicate organisms, and of these perhaps only in their infancy. It would be so swift and rudimentary a reaction that we could hardly recognize its operation. The mild doubt which exists about this question, therefore, while refuting our principal opponents, leaves us the more sure, not only that humor is instinctive, but that it is such an instinct as we have declared it to be.

The third test of the elementary-instinctive which McDougall proposed—its occurrence in exaggerated form in some morbid condition not involving a general exaggeration of nervous functions—is met by the sense of humor as perfectly, I think, as by any of the in-

stincts. The spasm of mad laughter is so frequent a form of morbid convulsion that to the popular mind this is the meaning of the word *hysteria*. And in these convulsions the laughter, although sometimes preceding or following or merely accompanying a more general muscular spasm, is frequently the sole essence of the attack. In an article composed as though to prove this very point, Doctor José Ingegnieros classifies the forms of the "rire hysterique" in such a way as to make this clear, and to make clear also that it is not only the act of laughter, but the humorous laugh, which is subject to this morbid intensification. He has himself observed a case in which a mood of comedy continued during the waking hours for twenty days, and he recalls the example described by Binet and Raymond of a woman who suffered for more than four months from a perpetual laugh. "Everything around her seemed to her ridiculous." It is well known that these seizures of comicality can be induced in a healthy person by administering about a fifth of a grain of the extract of hashish or Indian hemp. Gautier, in "Le Club des Hachischins," has described for the imagination the effect of this essence of comedy circulating in the blood-vessels through the brain. It was described in a more scientific way, but also upon the basis of personal experience, by Doctor Binet-Sanglé. We do not need pathology or poison, however, to make us see the humorous reaction carried to a point where it must be considered an "independent functional unit," for we can all remember being seized with fits of ecstati-

cally comic laughter, not unlike the entranced paroxysms of love and anger. They carried us out of reality, out of ourselves and our sureness of ourselves. They were mad, but they were not morbid. The mere recollection of the bliss of these mad moments ought to convince us that as long as the other besieging passions are explained upon the theory of hereditary instinct, humorous laughter will be so explained by those who properly esteem it.

And so here again it seems to be an inadequate appraisement of the subject-matter which has set the philosophers and pundits of abstract human nature off the track of the true explanation of laughter. They have failed to realize, not only how continual laughter is, but how intense the humorous passion. And if this is due in some cases to a slenderness of that passion in their own constitutions, then their very theories of laughter may be offered in evidence of its functional independence. For no doubt a marked depression of any emotional function, without the general poverty of feeling, offers as good proof of the primary among our instincts as the more startling testimony of the madhouse. And whatever may be true of these philosophers, there are at least many estimable and warm, and even merry-hearted, acquaintances of ours who "have no sense of humor," just as there are others who "cannot get mad," and even a few who "do not know what it means to be afraid." And whenever we describe these acquaintances as lacking in that sense, we put in doubt the Mechanical Theory, and the Theory

of Laughter as Liberty, and Freud's Theory. And since we most often so describe the ones who are well possessed of pride and self-estimation and glory, both sudden and gradual, we put in doubt also the Derision Theory. We speak of the sense of humor as a distinct hereditary emotional endowment, and that is what an instinct is.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

NOTES AND REFERENCES

Page 3

"A pert challenge": The quotation is from Henri Bergson's "Laughter, An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic," translated by Brereton and Rothwell, p. 1.

Page 5

"So delicate an employment of the features": Paolo Mantegazza in his "Physiognomy and Expression," chap. IX, gives a "synoptical table of the expression of pleasure," containing thirty-nine elements. The laugh itself was described by Charles Darwin in "The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals," and with still greater detail by C. Vanlair in an article on "La physiologie du rire" in the *Bulletin de la Classe des Sciences* of the *Academie Royale de Belgique*, 1903, no. 12, p. 1295. Vanlair calls it "The effective act of laughter."

"The two cannot be distinguished": This is the opinion of such divergent observers as Charles Darwin and Sigmund Freud (see pp. 207 and 199 of this book), of W. Preyer (see note to p. 7), and of Vanlair and Mantegazza (see note above). Léon Dumont, Robert de Lamennais, and L. Dugas (see notes to pp. 157, 147, and 133) are among those who have taken the opposite view, although their own native tongue, like many others, might have taught them that the smile is a "sub-laugh"—*sourire, sorridere, subridere, lächeln, sonreir*. The Hindu philosophers distinguished six different grades in the expression of mirth, beginning with the smile and ending with the convulsive laugh. (See references in note to p. 163.)

"Charles Fourier never smiled": See "Albert Brisbane, A Mental Biography," by R. Brisbane.

"Laugh with the lips": a Greek phrase for insincere laughter.

Page 7

"Sardonic": This derivation was suggested by Salomon Reinach (see note to p. 9), after rejecting the two classic traditions—that sardonic laughter was named after a Sardinian herb which "screwed up the face of the eater," and that it was named after the people of Sardis who laughed when they sacrificed their babies to the gods.

"The fortieth day": It was Aristotle, I believe, who said that babies smile on the fortieth day, and to judge by their modern biographers, that is a fair statement of the average. Darwin's two sons smiled on the forty-fifth day; Mantegazza's five children between the fortieth and sixtieth day; Preyer's child on the twenty-sixth day, and the heroine of Miss Shinn's "Biography of a Baby" was "jolly" in the second month. Zoroaster is supposed to have been born laughing—a more convincing sign of divinity, perhaps, than the immaculate conception.

"Smile of dawning welcome": The reader will understand that I do not mean to attribute to the consciousness of the baby the values that this smile has for his parents. All that we can say about the baby is that human faces interest him peculiarly, and cause him to smile oftener than other objects, and that the smile he directs toward them is very early distinguishable from the mere expression of cheerful interest. It soon becomes a definite and conscious act. To me the facts about babies recorded by W. Preyer and Miss Shinn and James Sully and others, although not so interpreted by them, seem to accord with the assumption that the smile directed toward a friendly countenance is not merely imitative nor due to an association of bodily comforts with this apparition, but has the character of an instinctive response. The parents were babies once, and if the baby's smile is so rich with emotional meaning for them, that is some indication of its intrinsic nature.

A good many different acts of laughter have been distinguished by various observers—a laugh of sexual and hostile glee (see p. 42), a laugh caused by chilliness, by fear (the "laughter of the damned"), hysterical laughter, maniac laughter, the mimic reflex laughter of idiots, a laughter caused by chemical exhilarants, and even a peculiar laugh at the moment of deliverance from

danger (Harold Höffding—see note to p. 141, and Salomon Reinach—see note to p. 9); and in addition to these, of course, the laughter that is merely a general expression of pleasure.

Aside from observation, my reasons for regarding an act of social welcome as the "original" laugh, are, first, that it has a very great biological importance, and, second, that it explains the laughter which is an "expression of pleasure" in a way similar to that in which other expressions have been explained. (See chap. IX of Part II.) The reader should understand, however, that my opinion here is not supported by any authority, and it is not vital to my explanation of humor. For that, he need only recognize that laughter has somehow become, in a very general sense, "an expression of joy or pleasure." And upon this all modern observers are agreed.

See W. Preyer, "Die Seele des Kindes," pp. 193–7; also the translations, "Mental Development in the Child" and "The Mind of the Child"; James Sully, "Essay on Laughter," chap. VI, pp. 164–170; Millicent W. Shinn, "The Biography of a Baby" and "Notes on the Development of a Child"; G. Stanley Hall (note to p. 132) and Paolo Mantegazza (note to p. 5).

Page 9

The quotation is from Edmund Spenser.

The fact about ritual laughter, with others equally interesting, is to be found in an article by Salomon Reinach called "Le rire rituel" in the *Revue de L'Université de Bruxelles* for May, 1911.

Page 12

As I have not entirely respected any of the established "theories of play," I refer the reader to the following books and articles where he can find out about them: "The Play of Animals," by Karl Groos, translated by J. Mark Baldwin, and "The Play of Man," by the same author, translated by Elizabeth L. Baldwin, will give him a full account of the Practice Theory. This theory is interestingly criticised by H. M. Stanley in an article called "Professor Groos and Theories of Play" in the *Psychological Review*, vol. 6, pp. 86–92.

The so-called Recapitulation Theory he will find suggested by

G. Stanley Hall in his "Adolescence," vol. I, chap. III, p. 160, and vol. II, chap. XII.

The theory of play as an overflow of superabundant nervous energy, originated by the poet Schiller and by Herbert Spencer, is developed in a modern way by H. A. Carr in an article on "The Survival Values of Play" in the *Investigations of the Department of Psychology and Education of the University of Colorado*, vol. 1, no. 2, November, 1902. These theories are in turn criticised by G. T. W. Patrick in an article on "The Psychology of Play" in the *Pedagogical Seminary*, vol. XXI, no. 3. Patrick says that "play is just the name we give to the child's activities," and this view is supported by Lilla Estelle Appleton in her "Comparative Study of the Play Activities of Adult Savages and Civilized Children." She thinks that an impulse to act and an organism at a certain stage of development is all that is needed to explain play. From which we may infer that professional psychologists are approaching the wisdom of Mark Twain, whose second chapter of "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer" deserves a place among the classics of this discussion. "If Tom had been a great and wise philosopher, like the writer of this book," says Mark Twain, "he would now have comprehended that work consists of whatever a body is obliged to do, and that play consists of whatever a body is not obliged to do."

W. Preyer, in his famous book on "The Mind of the Child," said that a satisfactory theory of play is wanting, and perhaps the statement is still true. But it seems to me that the description of play in McDougall's "Social Psychology" is at least the proper point of departure in the search for such a theory. It is significant that in his first book, "The Play of Animals," Karl Groos described play as instinctive, and J. Mark Baldwin stated in the translator's introduction that "Play is a veritable instinct." As instincts are supposed, however, to be responses to some specific objects or situations, this view was a good deal criticised, and in his second book, "The Play of Man," Groos adopted a more vague and non-committal attitude that is even less satisfactory. McDougall found a way between these two errors with his conception of "General Innate Tendencies," and his statement that we must recognize "some special differentiation of the instincts which find expression in playful activity."

It is from the vantage-ground of this conception that I have been able to describe play as I have.

Page 13

"We do not know much in a scientific way": See note to p. 58, or read the chapter on "Pleasure and Pain," or "The Affections," in any text-book of psychology. "The psychology of feeling is still, in large measure, a psychology of personal opinion and belief."—E. B. TITCHENER, "A Text Book of Psychology," p. 226. An interesting recent opinion is that of Edward J. Kempf in "The Autonomic Functions and the Personality."

Page 14

"A different act": Preyer tells us that he was able to distinguish in the next room the laughter of his child at tickling from the laughter that was an expression of pleasure. ("Die Seele des Kindes," p. 197.)

Page 15

"A chronic habit of violent laughing": Described by the Danish psychologist Lange in his book on the Emotions, and cited by L. Dugas in "La psychologie du rire."

Page 16

Plato: "Philebus."

"A modern scientist": G. Stanley Hall—see note to p. 132. For other opinions upon this subject, see pp. 158–161 of this book.

Page 18

Rabelais: Prologue to book IV. My acquaintance with Rabelais is through the translation by Thomas Urquhart and Peter Motteux, itself one of the great achievements of English literature.

Page 23

"Sad documents": "What is Man?" published anonymously in 1906; "The Mysterious Stranger," published after Mark Twain's death, and also the "Autobiography."

Page 24

This description of the religious state of mind I first suggested in an article on "The Religion of Patriotism" in *The Masses* for July, 1917.

Lamennais and Johann Erdmann: See note to p. 147. In opposition to them we have the authority of the Right Reverend, the Bishop of Tasmania, for the assertion that God laughs and enjoys an occasional joke ("The Theology of Laughter," *Hibbert Journal*, vol. 9, p. 296). The Bishop sets us wondering whether God enjoyed that one of Oliver Wendell Holmes about the "Right Reverend Successors of Him who had not where to lay his head."

Page 35

Aristophanes: "The Frogs."

For an example of the difference between scorn and ridicule compare Tolstoy's account of Wagner's operas in the appendix of his book "What is Art?" with that of Mark Twain in "A Tramp Abroad," chap. IX.

Page 39

"Uncle Toby": Tristram Shandy, Book II, chap. VII.

Page 43

Aristophanes: "The Acharnians," 644–5. Compare "The Knights," 510, and "The Satires of Horace," book I, no. 1, l. 24: "What prevents our telling truth with a laugh?"

Page 45

Cicero: "De Oratore."

Page 50

Mark Twain: "A Tramp Abroad," chap. XIII.

Page 53

"The Theory of the Leisure Class": A book most inappropriately named, for it will tell any one in any class why he does most of the futile things he does.

Page 54

Laurence Sterne: "Tristram Shandy," book I, chap. VII.

Page 55

Mr. Dooley: "On Making a Will."

Page 56

Henry Fielding: "Tom Jones," book I, chap. V.

Page 58

"A painful or unpleasant feeling may arise in us in two different ways": This fact is expressed a little more physiologically in the lines I have italicized in this paragraph from Thorndyke's book on "The Original Nature of Man," p. 128: "I believe that the original tendencies of man to be satisfied and to be annoyed —to welcome and reject—are described by these three laws of readiness and unreadiness: (1) That when a conduction unit [a given path, that is, in the brain and nervous system] is ready to conduct, conduction by it is satisfying, nothing being done to alter its action; (2) *that for a conduction unit ready to conduct not to conduct is annoying, and provokes whatever responses nature provides in connection with that particular annoying lack;* (3) *that when a conduction unit unready for conduction is forced to conduct, conduction by it is annoying.*"

That paragraph will indicate to the reader how little, and how vaguely, the psychologists have succeeded in understanding pain and pleasure, and the consequent limits of our own explanation of humor.

Page 59

"The range of our enjoyment": "It would be hard to find any disaster so great that it has not been a source of genuine mirth."—G. Stanley Hall. (See note to p. 132.)

Page 61

"Absurd": This word is very commonly used to describe those poetically humorous perceptions which I call *ludicrous*, and my restriction of its meaning here is arbitrary.

Page 64

"Repartee": To prove that the "coming to nothing," and not the "sudden glory," is what gives humor to these exchanges, we need only remember that the same game can be played in the reverse fashion, the original thesis being an assertion of playful humility, and the victory going to him who demeans himself the most.

Page 69

Addison: *The Spectator* (see note to p. 144).

Page 74

"Choice and comparison": In my "Enjoyment of Poetry," chaps. III, IV, V, and VI, I have explained upon this basis the psychology of poetic figures. What I have said there about poetry underlies all that I say here about poetic humor.

Page 77

"Degradation": This is James Sully's expression in his "Essay on Laughter."

The incident of the angel—from the heaven scene in Charlie Chaplin's film, "The Kid"—is a better example of his humor than his acting. The incident of the cow is from an earlier film called "Sunnyside." I hope that the "movie fan" who reads this will not identify the change I have described with the appearance of serious dramatic pathos in "The Kid." It was both a more gradual and a more unusual change than that.

Page 80

"A tortoise-shell cat": This was Mark Twain's description of the picture.

Page 86

"Smile talk" is a literal translation of a Chinese word for "joke."

Page 93

"Peculiar Disaster": "Risu inepto res ineptior nulla est."—CATULLUS.

Page 94

Rabelais: "Put me on my domino, for I am cold—besides I want to die in it, for Beati qui in Domino Moriuntur."

Heine: Speaking to a priest who urged him to make his peace with God, he said: "Dieu me pardonnera, c'est son métier."

Page 97

Mark Twain: The story is told by his biographer, Albert Bigelow Paine, and the speech published in the volume called "Mark

Twain's Speeches." Whoever wishes to know this man should read Van Wyck Brooks's admirable study, "The Ordeal of Mark Twain."

Page 98

Rabelais: Prologue to book I.

Page 102

The quotation is from Shakespeare's "King Henry IV."

Page 109

De Quincey: "Essay on Conversation."

Page 114

Aristophanes: "The Frogs." The lines in verse are from Gilbert Murray's translation. The prose translation is my own.

Page 115

Cephisophon: see Dunster's translation of "The Frogs." Gilbert Murray says that Cephisophon was a kind of secretary to Euripides. Benjamin Rogers says that he was a friend. J. H. Frere says that he was an actor in the plays.

Page 117

Shakespeare: "Love's Labour's Lost."

Page 119

"Sentimental Tommy": by James M. Barrie, pp. 19 and 35.

Page 123

"Theories of Humor": In this history I have not attempted to rake up and make record of everything that has been written about laughter or the comic, but only to give a true general picture, and omit no particular idea that is of unique value or interest.

When not otherwise described in the notes, the translations are my own.

Plato: "Philebus," Jowett's translation. 46–50. Compare "The Republic," V, 452.

Page 124

Aristotle: "Poetics," V, translated by S. H. Butcher.

Page 125

Plato: "Republic," III, 388; "Theætetus," 174. See also "Cratylus," 645.

Page 126

Rabelais: Prologue to book I.
Plato: "Symposium," 177.

Page 127

Plato: "Symposium," 189.

Page 128

Aristotle: "Rhetoric," book III, chap. XI.

Page 130

Cicero: "De Oratore," book II, 54–71. Some of the translations from Cicero are my own, others from the book by W. Guthrie.

Page 131

Quintilian: "Institutes of the Orator." Translated by J. Patsall, book VI, chap. III.

Page 132

Hume: "A Treatise of Human Nature."
Jean Paul: See note to p. 169.
"The Psychology of Tickling, Laughing and the Comic": by G. Stanley Hall and Arthur Allin, *American Journal of Psychology*, October, 1897. See also the remarks of H. M. Stanley in the same journal for January, 1898.

Page 133

Ribot: "Psychology of the Emotions." Translated in the Contemporary Science Series, pp. 352–7.
L. Dugas: "Psychologie du rire," 1902.
Croce: "L'Umorismo," *Journal of Comparative Literature*, vol. I, no. 3.
Cazamian: "Pourquoi nous ne pouvons définir l'humour," *Revue Germanique* for 1906.

Page 136

Saint Gregory of Nyssa: Translated by Benjamin Rand in his "Classical Psychologists," p. 127.

Page 137

The quotations are from "The Courtier," by Baldassare Castiglione, done into English by Sir Thomas Hoby, anno 1561. The original book was completed in 1516.

Page 138

The statements about Tresseno, Maggi, and Robertelli are made on the authority of J. E. Spingarn in his "History of Literary Criticism in the Renaissance."

Page 139

L. Joubert: "Traité du ris," 1579.

Hobbes: "Leviathan," part I, chap. VI.

Page 140

"Sudden glory": Compare the phrase "Selbstgefühl in statu nascendi," used by the German psychologist Heymans to express a similar idea, *Zeitschrift für Psychol. und Physiol. der Sinnesorgane*, XI, 31–43, and XX, 164–173.

De Lamennais: See note to p. 147.

Page 141

Hobbes: "Human Nature," part I, chap. IX, 13.

Descartes: "Passions de l'âme," III, 178.

A. Zeising: "Æsthetische Forschungen," 1855.

Karl Groos: "Einleitung in die Æsthetik," 1892, quoted by Franz Jahn (see note to p. 218). "Die Spiele des Menschen," 1899.

Harald Höffding, in his "Outlines of Psychology," and also in his book on "Den Store Humor," translated into German under the title "Humor als Lebensgefühl," combines the derision and the disappointment theories in a manner similar to that of Groos and Zeising.

Page 142

Th. Ziegler: "Das Gefühl," 1893, pp. 142–7. Kuno Fischer had also emphasized the playfulness of the comic attitude, de-

fining wit as "playful judgment" in his essay "Ueber den Witz," 1889.

Stephan Schütze: "Versuch Einer Theorie des Komischen," 1817.

Page 143

Otto Schauer: "Ueber das Wesen der Komik," *Archiv für die Gesamte Psychologie*, XVIII, 1910.

Lillien J. Martin: "Psychology of Æsthetics—Experimental Prospecting in the Field of the Comic," *American Journal of Psychology*, January, 1905.

Page 144

Dugas: "Psychologie du rire."

Addison: *The Spectator*, April 10, 1711, no. 35.

Page 145

Lord Shaftesbury: "On the Freedom of Wit and Humor." (See also p. 184.)

Bain: "The Emotions and the Will," chapter on "The Emotion of Power."

Page 147

De Lamennais: "Esquisse d'une Philosophie," book IX, chap. II, p. 369. See also Professor J. E. Erdmann's "Ernste Spiele," in which we are advised that we should not speak of hearty laughter, because "laughter is in fact heartless."

Page 148

Henri Bergson: See note to p. 1. Compare with Bergson's statement the opinion of Walter Pater that "pity" is "of the essence of humor." (Postscript, p. 254.) I know of no better way to disprove Bergson's assertion than by reading to a person of quick sympathy Stephen Leacock's little masterpiece, "My Financial Career." (See "Literary Lapses," p. 9.)

Page 149

Irvin Cobb: "The Trail of the Lonesome Laugh," *Everybody's Magazine*, April, 1911.

Page 151

Voltaire: Preface to "L'Enfant Prodigue."

Page 152

Spinoza: "Ethics," part IV, prop. xlv, note.
Pascal: Quoted by Dugas in "La psychologie du rire."

Page 153

Kant: "The Critique of Judgment," translated by J. H. Bernard, p. 223.

Page 154

Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling: "Sämmtliche Werke," First Part, vol. V, p. 711.
Schopenhauer: "The World as Will and Idea," translated by Haldane and Kemp, 1819.

Page 156

London *Spectator*, June 29, 1907.

Page 157

"Conflict of habit systems": A phrase employed by H. Heath Bawden in an article on "The Comic as Illustrating the Summation-Irradiation Theory of Pleasure-Pain," in the *Psychological Review*, September, 1910.
Léon Dumont: "Des causes du rire," 1862. Chapter on "Le risible" in "La Théorie scientifique de la sensibilité," 1877.

Page 159

Oswald Külpe: "Outlines of Psychology," sec. 23, p. 14. See also p. 89.

Page 160

James Sully: "Essay on Laughter," chap. III, pp. 50–65, 1902.

Page 161

Lillien J. Martin: See note to p. 143.
H. L. Hollingsworth: "Experimental Studies in Judgment; Judgments of the Comic," *Psychological Review*, March, 1911.

Page 163

"Dásarūpa": Translated by George C. O. Haas.
"Sahitya Darpana": Translated by Ballantyne and Mitra.
William Hazlitt: "On Wit and Humor."

Page 165

"1475": The date of the first quotation given in Murray's New English Dictionary.

Page 166

"In the century following Shakespeare": Murray's Dictionary dates the use of *humor* in the sense of the laughable or jocose from 1682.

Page 169

Carlyle: "Essay on Jean Paul Richter."
Jean Paul: "Vorschule der Æsthetik," 1804.

Page 170

Aristophanes: See p. 43.
Rabelais: See p. 18.
Voltaire: See p. 151.

Page 171

Laurence Sterne: "Tristram Shandy," book IV, chap. XXII.
Charles Lamb spoke of our enjoyment of "being cheated" as the value of a joke (Popular Fallacies, no. IX), and Mark Twain seemed to regard "surprise" as the essence of it ("How to Tell a Story").
Byron: "Don Juan," canto IV, stanza IV.
Heine: "Fresko-Sonnette an Christian S."
Hegel: "Philosophy of Fine Art," translated by F. P. B. Osmaston, vol. IV, p. 302. See also Bryant's briefer translation.

Page 172

Sahitya Darpana: See note to p. 163.
Chr. W. Weisse: "System der Æsthetik," 1830. See also Arnold Ruge, "Neue Vorschule der Æsthetik," pp. 58–59, 1837.

Page 173

Lotze: See note to p. 217.
M. Lazarus: "Das Leben der Seele," 1856.

Page 175

Herbert Spencer: "The Physiology of Laughter," in "Essays," vol. II.

Page 176

Theodor Lipps: "Komik und Humor, Beitrage zur Asthetik," 1898.

Page 179

"One of Lipps's critics": Herckenrath, author of the "Problèmes d'estétique et de morale," 1898.

Page 183

"Real contribution to the science of humor": The attempt to make a quantitative mechanics of the psychology of feeling, exemplified in this theory of Lipps, in the article on "Play," by H. A. Carr, based upon H. R. Marshall's "Pain, Pleasure, and Æsthetics" (see note to p. 12), and also in H. Heath Bawden's article on the comic (see note to p. 157), expresses a pious scientific aspiration, and I have no desire to judge of its value in general. But since in so far as it relates to humorous pleasures, it ignores, rather than explains, their essential qualitative difference, it can be dismissed here as nothing in its present simplicity but an aspiration.

Page 185

Alexander Bain: "The Emotions and the Will," chap. XIV.

Charles Renouvier: "La nouvelle monadologie," note 73 to part IV.

Page 186

A. Penjon: "Le Rire et la Liberté," *Revue Philosophique*, vol. XXXVI, August, 1893.

John Dewey: "The Theory of Emotion," *Psychological Review*, beginning November, 1894. See also the article of H. Heath Bawden (note to p. 157) for a mature statement of the liberty theory. Sir Arthur Mitchell, in a book on "Dreaming, Laughing, and Blushing," went so far with the liberty theory as to describe laughter as "a state of mental disorder." Giulio A. Levi, on the other hand, in "Il Comico" (1913), declares that we enjoy the comic because in that moment of freedom from the discipline of ends and interests we recognize the ethical reality of our persons.

Page 187

The quotation is from "The Psychology of Humor," an article by L. W. Kline, *American Journal of Psychology*, October, 1907.

Page 188

"Hegel's wisdom": See also in the *American Journal of Psychology*, April, 1911, Horace M. Kallen's article on "The Authentic Principle in Comedy." He describes comedy as "a relation in which we are harmoniously and completely adapted to what is in itself a disharmony, a maladjustment."

Page 190

Sigmund Freud: "Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten," 1905. Translated into English by A. A. Brill.

Page 206

Lactantius: "The Divine Institutes," book III, chap. X.

Darwin: "The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals," chap. VIII.

Page 211

L. Joubert: See p. 139.

Page 213

Descartes: See note to p. 141. Descartes explained the laugh as due to the suddenness with which these two passions are aroused, causing the blood to rush from the right chamber of the heart into the lungs, and so forcing the air out in a gust.

Page 214

Moses Mendelssohn: "Philosophische Schriften," vol. II, p. 23.

Lessing: "Laocoön," 23.

"Humor is the kiss": The quotation is from F. Baldensperger, who so describes this phase of German literature in his essay on "Les définitions de l'humour," Etudes d'Histoire Littéraire, first series.

Page 215

Goethe: Maximen und Reflexionen, 13.

Novalis: "Schriften," Verlag. von G. Reimer, Berlin, 1837, vol. II, p. 223.

Theodor Vischer: "Æsthetik," 1846.

Page 217

K. W. F. Solger: "Erwin, vier Gespräche über das Schöne und die Kunst," 1815. Also "Vorlesungen über Æsthetik," 1829.

Bohtz: "Ueber das Komische und die Komödie," p. 75, 1844.

Moritz Carrière: "Æsthetik," 1859, p. 197 of the second edition.

Hermann Lotze: "Geschichte der Æsthetik in Deutschland," book II, chaps. IV and V, 1868.

Page 218

Julius Bahnsen: "Das Tragische als Weltgesetz und der Humor als ästhetische Gestalt des Metaphysischen," 1877. For an account of this book and of those of Weisse and Zeising I am indebted to a little volume by Doctor Franz Jahn entitled "Das Problem des Komischen in seiner geschichtlichen Entwicklung."

Ewald Hecker: "Physiologie und Psychologie des Lachens und des Komischen," 1873. In Kant's "Critique of Judgment" (see note to p. 153) the idea of an "oscillation" of the attention in comic states is also introduced, and related in some cumbersome way to the rhythmic motions of laughter.

Page 221

"Point of a joke": See also "Neue Vorschule der Æsthetik," by Arnold Ruge, and "A Syllabus of Lectures on the Psychology of Pain and Pleasure," by Benjamin Ives Gilman, *American Journal of Psychology*, October, 1893.

Emil Kraepelin: "Zur Psychologie des Komischen," in Wundt's "Philosophische Studien," II, p. 128, and p. 327, 1886.

Wundt: "Grundzüge der physiologischen Psychologie," 4th edition, vol. II, p. 249. Also p. 607, where he still suggests a connection between this oscillation and the rhythmic motions of laughter.

Page 224

Malebranche: "The Search after Truth," 1674.

Page 225

The Definition of Instinct: In James Drever's "Instinct in Man" the history and contemporary status of this concept is fully set forth.

Page 226

"Humor is an element": Since I have quoted Bernard Shaw in opposition to the idea of this book, I must quote further his unconscious indorsement of its thesis. I had already written this sentence when his letter came, stating that "Humor is an element, not a product nor a compound. It makes you laugh: that is how you detect its presence. Dirt, cruelty, disaster are rich in it; happiness and generosity abound in it; mere folly absorbs it freely; it attaches itself to every kind of event with complete moral indifference, having no sort of bias one way or another between the adventures of Saint Francis and those of Mr. Charles Chaplin."

Page 227

"So early and so spontaneously": James Drever adds this to McDougall's three tests of the primary instincts.

"Their gift of laughter": Freud says that "The child lacks all feeling for the comic," but it is evident that he derived this opinion from his theory of the comic and not from his observations of children. A contrary opinion is expressed by Harald Höffding in his "Outlines of Psychology" and by Stephen S. Colvin in an article on "The Educational Value of Humor" in the *Pedagogical Seminary*, vol. 14, no. 4, December, 1907. I think those people themselves are a little too grown-up, or perhaps they were born grown-up, who cannot see humor in the eyes of children, and by some slight play of memory and imaginative sympathy know how comic are the things at which they laugh.

Page 231

Lipps: See p. 176.

G. Stanley Hall: See note to p. 132.

Darwin: "Descent of Man," p. 71.
G. J. Romanes: "Animal Intelligence," p. 444.
Léon Dumont: See note to p. 157.

Page 232

C. Lloyd Morgan: "Animal Life and Intelligence," p. 406.

Page 234

José Ingegnieros: "Le rire hystérique," *Journal de Psychologie*, vol. 3, 1906, p. 501.

Binet Sanglé: *Revue Scientifique*, March 2, 1901. For further bibliography see Victor Robinson's "Essay on Hasheesh," published by *The Medical Review of Reviews*, New York, 1912.

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